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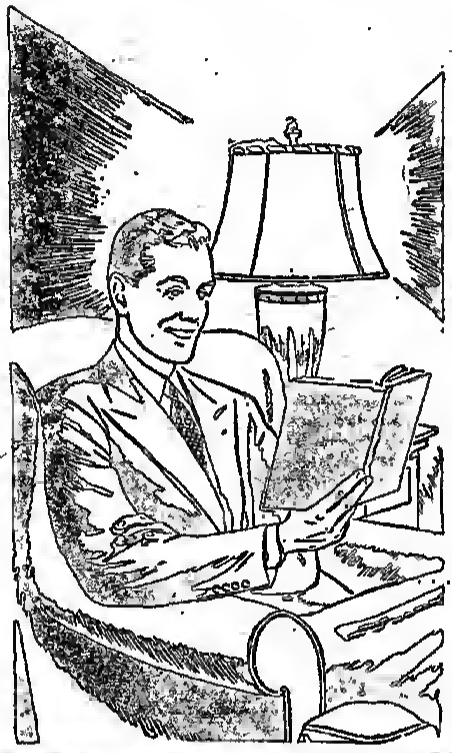

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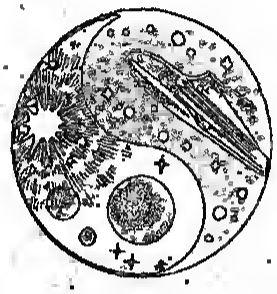

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AS PROMISED, with the appearance of this, our July issue, we list those science fiction fan organizations whose officers have seen fit to make us officially aware of their existence.

To avoid any suggestion of preference (we have none, by the way) we are listing them alphabetically according to their geographical locations. Anyone writing in from Zululand (no one did) will therefore be near the end of the parade and his society's only hope of rising higher would lie in moving to—say, Abo, Finland.

The Tie of Fandom

The purpose of this list is to be of service to followers of science fiction—to enable those who wish companionship rather than polite tolerance when they take off on such subjects as the plausibility of Charles Fort or the imminence of space flight to find others nearby with whom they may air their favorite topics in assurance of honest response.

Incidentally, after a number of years of contact with science fiction fan organizations from the eminence (?) of this editorial chair, we can only salaam three times and say that the binding factor in fandom—the imaginative non-commercialism common to all who can look beyond the dust that surrounds us and see the faint glimmer of the stars—is one of the finest ties we have yet encountered in too-close to four decades in this vale of belly laughs and tears.

A Gate to Understanding

Like science itself or any of the arts it recognizes no international boundaries, no date lines, no cuticular pigmentation, no line of caste. Fandom is the most truly democratic and anarchistic (in the highest sense of the word, implying no need of legal restriction) group that we have ever come in contact with.

Unlike science and the arts it has no reverse face—no atom bomb or dark propaganda. It can only be subversive to those narrowly subversive viewpoints whose aim, in the name of privilege for self, seems to be destruction of humanity. It is a gate to full understanding of one's fellows, whatever their race, estate or creed.

From time to time small groups of editorially-minded fans adopt solemn resolutions to seek to improve the manners and morals of the less enlightened citizenry in which they are imbedded. We find such do-goodism severely at fault.

The aim of science-fiction fandom, it seems to us, should be merely to improve itself, not others. In so doing, especially in the elimination of the endless petty Lilliputian-Blefuscan feuds which certain of its less enlightened members take with such absurd gravity, it will be doing more than its share toward making this precarious globe a better place upon which to exist.

But enough of such idle vaporizing—the list:

ALTOONA, PENNSYLVANIA

Those interested in science fiction should get in touch with John E. Blyler, 703 21st Street.

BEARDSTOWN, ILLINOIS

Illinois Science Fiction Fans—mailing address, James Harmon, 427 East Eight Street, Mount Carmel, Illinois. Or contact Gene A. Hyde, 400 East Eighth Street, Beardstown, Illinois.

CINCINNATI, OHIO

The Cincinnati Fantasy Group. Anxious for members from anywhere within a hundred-mile radius. Contact Donald E. Ford, 129 Maple Avenue, Sharonville, Ohio, Telephone PR-7605M.

CLYDE, OHIO

Young Fandom. President, Tom Jewett, 670 Clyde Street, Clyde, Ohio. Dues, 50c per annum. Mail to Secretary-Treasurer Del Grant, Box #14, Lewiston, Idaho. Official publication bi-monthly.

GREAT BRITAIN

The following are courtesy of Captain Kenneth F. Slater, Riverside, South Brink, Wisbech, Cambridgeshire.

The British Fantasy Library. Librarian, Ron Holmes, 67 Linkside Road, Belle Vale, Liverpool. Current membership about sixty.

The Stoke-on-Trent Fantasy Group. Secretary,

Ken Johnson, 69 Worthington Street, Fenton, Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire. Membership about six.

The following is included in the British listing at Captain Slater's suggestion, since the mails to Australia are slow . . .

The Sydney Futurean Society. Secretary, Vol Molesworth, 160 Beach Street, Coogee, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia.

LOS ANGELES

The Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society. Secretary, Arthur Cox, 1203 Ingraham Street, Los Angeles 14, California. Clubhouse located at 637½ South Bixel Street, Los Angeles 14, California. For information call Forrest J. Ackerman, Federal 2231. One of the oldest clubs in the field—has been operating for a round dozen years and held over 425 meetings liberally attended by such stf authors as Ray Bradbury, A. E. van Vogt, Edmond Hamilton, Henry Kuttner, Leigh Brackett and Bryce Walton. Sample copy of the LSFS organ, Shangri L'Affaires, may be purchased from Editor Dale Hart, Apartment 20, 1116 Georgia Street, Los Angeles 15, California, for one thin dime.

MILWAUKEE

Milwaukee Science Fantasy Society. Chairman, Bob Stein, 514 West Vienna Avenue, Milwaukee 12, Wisconsin. Meetings once a month at homes of members. Free copies of Tympani, the house organ, given to all applicants by Mr. Stein.

MONTREAL

McGill-Montreal Science Fiction Society, Arts and Science Building, McGill University, Montreal 2, Quebec. President, Moe Diner, 445 Mount Pleasant Avenue, Westmount—phone FI-7556. Second Vice President and Publicity Committee Chairman, Bert Joss, 5239 Park Avenue, Apartment #1—phone CR-8671. Secretary, C. J. Bowie-Reed (Membership Committee), Arts and Science Building, McGill University, Mtl., 2. Current membership about 30.

MOORHEAD, MINNESOTA

National Fantasy Fan Federation, 1028 Third Avenue South, Moorhead, Minnesota. Secretary-Treasurer, K. Martin Carlson. Two hundred eighteen members in this established international organization.

NEW YORK CITY

National Young Planeteers. Write to Bob Shea, 150 Bennett Avenue, New York 33, New York.

ORCUTT, CALIFORNIA

Fantasy Artisans. Write president Ken Brown, P.O. Box #105, Los Alamos, California, or house organ Editor Russ Manning, P.O. Box #1746, Orcutt, California. A young outfit that needs members.

SOUTH GATE, CALIFORNIA

The Outlanders Society. Host and Welcome Chairman, Rick Sneary, 2962 Santa Ana Street, South Gate, California.

TIFFIN, OHIO

Untitled but active stf society. Get in touch with Jack Roberts, 69 Erie Street, Tiffin, Ohio.

Well, that's it for this time. We hope that when we again run a list of science fiction

(Continued on page 122)

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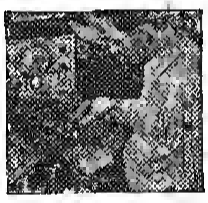

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BANG!
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THE WHOLE CITY OWES YOU A DEBT
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HMMM — HE'S ONE OF MY REPORTERS
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MR. WINN, OUR PUBLISHER, WANTS TO SEE YOU AT HIS HOME
NOT IN THIS RIG... I'M CLEANING UP FIRST
REPORTER DOING THUGS WITH CUP'S GUN!
A RAZOR? TAKE MINE
SAY, THIS BLADE'S GOOD NEWS! SWELLEST SHAVE I'VE EVER HAD
THIN GILLETTES ALWAYS GET RID OF WHISKERS QUICK AND EASY
I'M ROUGH ON PANHANDLERS, ALLEN, BUT AS FOR OUR STAR REPORTER...
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the VALLEY of CREATION

In the darkness, there came to Eric Nelson a summons and a warning—a summons to a land where beast and human walked alike, a warning of war and massacre strange and terrible!

CHAPTER I: *Dream Shadows*

IT SEEMED to Eric Nelson that a strange voice spoke in his mind as he lay in drink-drugged sleep in the squalid Chinese village inn.

"Shall I kill, little sister?"

The voice was mental, not physical. His brain recorded it not through his ears but directly.

And it was not human. There was an alien quality in its vibration that set even his dreaming mind bristling.

"No, Tark! You were to watch, not to

kill! Not—yet!"

To Nelson the answering mental voice seemed human enough. But though it lacked the uncannily alien quality of tbe first it was chill, silvery, merciless.

He knew that he was dreaming. He knew that he lay here in the battle-wrecked frontier village of Yen Shi, that he had drunk too much to forget the doom that stared him and his companions in the face, that fatigue and too much liquor were doing this to him.

Yet it was creepily real, this swift, urgent dialogue of voices that only his mind could hear! And again his nerves crawled at the non-human strangeness of the first voice.

"They should all die now, little sister! For he even now seeks them out, to hire them as our foes! Ei has brought me word!"

"Tark, no! Watch only till I order—"

Nerve-tension snapped and Eric Nelson found himself scrambling up from his blankets, staring wildly around the dark room.

A black flying shadow leaped for the open window and was gone as his blurred eyes focused—a shadow that was not human!

With a strangled exclamation, Nelson lurched to the window, plucking the heavy pistol from his belt.

Great wings flapped suddenly out there in the night, rapidly receding. He leveled the pistol but he could see nothing, and after a moment there were no more sounds.

Eric Nelson stood bewildered, bis skin still creeping from the uncanny terror of the experience. His brain was fogged by sleep and by the sick aftertaste of the previous night's drinking.

Gradually his bristling nerves quieted. There was nothing more out there in the dark—nothing but the few blinking lights of the wretched mud village, cowering underneath the silent stars, close beside the black wall of the great mountains that shouldered all the way to Tibet.

Dawn was coming. Nelson holstered his gun and ran bis hands heavily over his unshaven face. Waves of pain surged up through his eyeballs as he turned from the window.

"Too much to drink," he muttered. "No wonder I'm hearing—and seeing—things."

He made a deliberate effort to thrust down the uncanny strangeness of his experience, to forget it. But he couldn't—quite.

It was not the mere fact of the voices that was so weird. The brain heard strange things in dreams. It was the alien, somehow *husky* quality of that first voice that still shook him.

Nelson lit a clay oil-lamp. Its flickering rays and the growing light of dawn showed nothing unusual in the bare, squalid little room. He put on his uniform-jacket and went through a door into the big common room of the deserted inn. Three of his four fellow-officers were in the room.

Two of them, the big Dutchman, Piet Van Voss and "Lefty" Wister, the spidery little Cockney, were snoring in their bunks.

Nick Sloan, the third, stood shaving in front of a tiny steel mirror, his big body easily balanced on firm-set feet, his flat, bard brown face looking coolly over his shoulder at Nelson.

"I heard you yell in there," Sloan said. "Bad dream?"

Eric Nelson hesitated. "I don't know. There was something in the room. A shadow—"

"I'm not surprised," Sloan drawled unsympathetically. "You were pretty stiff last night."

Nelson was suddenly resentfully aware of the contrast of his disheveled figure and tumbled blond hair witb Sloan's competent neatness.

"Yes, I was drunk last night," he said harshly. "And I'll be drunk again tonight and tomorrow night also."

A patient voice sighed from the doorway. "Not tomorrow night, Captain Nelson. No."

NELSON turned. It was Li Kin who stood in the doorway. He made an absurd figure, his scrawny little body swathed in a major's uniform far too big for him.

His gentle, fine-planed face was sagging with weariness and behind his thick-lensed spectacles his black eyes held sadness.

"A Government column is on its way here from Nun-Yan," he said. "It will be here by tomorrow noon."

Nick Sloan's tawny eyes narrowed slightly. "That's pretty fast action. But it's only what we expected."

Yes, Eric Nelson thought heavily—it was only what they had expected.

They five had been staff officers for Yu Chi Chan, the fat warlord who had held illegal sway over this remote southwestern province on the borders of Tibet.

They were, except for Li Kin, frank mer-

cenaries who had taken many a warlord's pay. Nelson had been ten years in China, Nick Sloan nearly as long. Van Voss and the little Cockney were fugitive criminals, flotsam of China's civil wars.

But now they were at the end of their rope. Fat Yu Chi Chan had infringed a rival warlord's territory. There had been an attack and battle here in Yen Shi, a battle which had ended with both warlords dead and their rag-tag armies shattered and dispersed.

And now Nanking, anxious to reassert its authority over this southwestern hinterland,

ERIC NELSON

had its troops on the way to Yen Shi. And they five could expect nothing better than a quick firing squad as rebels.

"We've got to get out of here by tomorrow morning or we're cooked," Nick Sloan said curtly.

Lefty Wister had awakened and stood, a cigarette drooping laxly from his thin lips. Van Voss was stretching hugely in his bunk, scratching his enormous paunch as he listened.

"Where can we go without running into the bloody Nanking troops?" whined the little Cockney.

Nelson shrugged. "North, east and south we'd walk right into their hands. West there's only the Tibetan mountains, where we'd merely dodge around until the tribesmen got us."

Li Kin raised his tired head. "That reminds me. A tribesman from those mountains wanted to talk to me last night. Something about hiring us to fight for his people."

Van Voss grunted. "Some *verdommte* Tibetan chief who wants a few machine-guns to crush his neighbors."

Sloan's hard face was thoughtful. "It might be an out though. In Tibet we'd be safe from Nanking. Where is the man?"

"Still waiting outside, I think," said the Chinese. "I'll get him." He went heavily toward the doorway.

Nelson looked after him without interest, simply because he was sick of looking at the faces of Sloan and Van Voss and Wister.

Through the open door he watched Li Kin cross the dusty compound to a crumbling mud wall, where another man sat—a bareheaded man in shapeless quilted garments, sitting motionless in the sun.

He did not sit with the patient immobility of peaceful things but with the tight-coiled watchfulness of a crouching tiger. He rose with a lithe quick movement when Li Kin spoke to him.

Li Kin and the stranger came back across the compound. As they entered the room Li Kin said, "This is Shan Kar."

Nelson glanced indifferently. Shan Kar was of his own age and stature but no more like himself than a wildcat is like a terrier. His bare black head was alertly erect as he studied the white men.

Here was no primitive tribesman! The man's handsome olive face and dark eyes had the haughty strength and fire and pride of a prince of ancient blood.

Eric Nelson sat up.

"You're no Tibetan," he said sharply, in that language.

"No," answered Shan Kar quickly. His accent was slurred as though he spoke an obscure dialect of Tibetan. He pointed through the open door at the gray, sunlit mountains in the distance.

"My people dwell there, in a valley called L'Lan. And we men and women of L'Lan have—enemies."

There was a flicker of emotion in his eyes as he spoke, fierce as a sword-flash. His eyes were, for that moment, fiery and intense, the eyes of a fanatic warrior, of a man with a cause.

"Enemies too powerful for us to conquer with our own forces! We have heard of the white men's new, powerful weapons. So

I came to hire such men and weapons to help us in our struggle."

Nelson felt suddenly certain that Shan Kar referred to no mere petty tribal struggle. This man was not playing his game of war for horses, women or conquest but for something bigger.

SHAN KAR shrugged. "I heard of the warlord Yu Chi Chan and came here to make an offer to him. But, before I arrived he was dead in the battle here. But you who remain know the use of such weapons. If you come with me to L'Lan and use them we can pay you well."

"Pay us?" Nick Sloan's face showed his sharp interest. "Pay us with what?"

For answer, Shan Kar reached beneath his quilted cloak and brought forth a curious object which he handed them.

"We have heard that this metal is valuable, to you of the outer world."

Eric Nelson puzzledly examined the thing. It was a thick hoop of dull gray metal, a ring several inches in diameter. Mounted on opposite sides of the metal hoop were two small disks of quartz.

There was something odd about the little quartz disks. Each was only an inch across but each had a carven pattern of interlocking spirals that baffled and blurred vision.

Lefty Wister whined scornfully, "The blimey beggar wants to hire us with a hoop of old iron!"

"Iron? No," grunted Van Voss. "I see that metal down in the Sumatra mines. It is platinum."

"Platinum? Let me see that!" exclaimed Sloan. He closely examined the gray metal hoop. "By heaven, it is!"

His tawny eyes narrowed as he looked up at the silent, watching stranger. "Where did this come from?"

"From L'Lan," answered Shan Kar. "There is more there—much more. All you can take away will be yours as pay."

Nick Sloan swung around on Nelson. "Nelson, this could be big! All the years you and I have sweated for stupid warlords we haven't had an opportunity like this!"

The Cockney's eyes were already shining covetously. Van Voss merely stared sleepily at the metal boop.

Eric Nelson fingered it again and asked, "Where exactly did it come from? It looks almost like a queer instrument of some kind rather than an ornament."

Shan Kar answered evasively. "It came from a cavern, in L'Lan. And there is much more metal like it there."

Li Kin said slowly, "A cavern in L'Lan? That name sounds familiar, somehow. I think there was a legend once—"

Shan Kar interrupted. "Your answer, white men—will you come?"

Nelson hesitated. There was too much about this business that was unexplained. Yet they dared not stay here in Yen Shi.

He finally told Shan Kar, "I'll commit myself to no bargains in the dark. But I'm willing to go to your valley. If the set-up is as you say, we'll fight your battle—for platinum."

Sloan planned swiftly. "We can get a few light machine-guns and what tommy-guns and grenades we'll need from old Yu's arsenal. But it'll take work to round up enough pack-ponies by tomorrow morning."

His face crisped in resolve. "We can do it though. We'll be ready to start at dawn, Shan Kar."

When Shan Kar had gone Lefty Wister uttered a crow of laughter.

"The bloody fool! Don't he realize that with machine-guns and grenades we can just take his platinum and walk off with it?"

Nelson turned angrily on the evilly eager little Cockney. "We'll do nothing of the sort! If we do agree to fight for this man, we'll—"

Suddenly Eric Nelson stopped short, startled and shaken by abrupt remembrance.

Remembrance of his weird dream of only an hour before, the dream in which human and unhuman voices had spoken in his mind!

"They should all die now, little sister! For he even now seeks them out to hire them as our foes!"

That alien, unhuman mental voice—had it been real after all? For Shan Kar *had* just provisionally hired them to fight enemies of whom they knew nothing! Into what mysterious struggle were they entering?

CHAPTER II

Witch-Girl

THE haunting memory of fantastic nightmare still oppressed Eric Nelson as he sat moodily late that night in the single

drink-shop surviving in the battered village.

He was bone-weary from the long day's urgent work of rounding up pack-ponies. That and habit were why he had insisted to Li Kin that they stop at this mud-walled tavern whose fat Cantonese proprietor had somehow hoarded a few cases of imitation Scotch.

"Sloan and the others will need us to help pack," murmured Li Kin. He looked tired, his fine eyes blinking behind the thick spectacles. "We should go."

"In a little while," Nelson nodded. "They can get the stuff out of old Yu's arsenal and pack it without us anyway."

He tilted the square bottle, looking unseeingly at the wretched few tables whose grotesque shadows wavered on the crumbling mud walls as the oil-lamp flickered.

Why did that weird little experience stick in his mind like a burr? A dream of strange, coldly menacing voices in his mind, a shadow leaping across his room, a sound of great wings in the night—what was there in those to disturb him so?

"Yet it's cursed queer about Shan Kar," he muttered, half to himself.

Li Kin's head bobbed in earnest agreement. "Very queer. For today I have remembered about L'Lan."

Nelson stared at him blankly. "L'Lan? Oh, that's the name of the fellow's valley back in the mountains. I wasn't thinking of that."

"I have been thinking of it very much," the little Chinese officer affirmed. He leaned across the rough table. "You've been in China a long time, Captain Nelson. Have you never heard the name?"

"No, I never—" Nelson began, then stopped.

He did remember something.

"Magic valley of L'Lan! Long and long ago in L'Lan were born the Yang and Yin —life and death, good and evil, joy and sorrow!"

It came dimly back into Nelson's mind across seven war-crowded years, the rapt talk of that blind old seer whom he'd saved from the Young Marshal's soldiers up in Shansi.

"Still, still lives L'Lan the golden, deep in the guarding mountains! Still lives in L'Lan the ancient Brotherhood, for that hidden heartland of the world was the valley of creation!"

"I remember the story now," Nelson admitted. "A sort of Central Asian Garden-of-Eden myth."

"Yes, a myth, a legend," Li Kin said earnestly. "Yet this man Shan Kar says that he comes from L'Lan!"

Eric Nelson shugged. "'Nature imitates Art,' said Wilde. The tribe out there in the mountains probably named their valley after the legend."

"Perhaps so," Li Kin said doubtfully. He got to his feet. "Should we not go now?"

"Go along and tell Sloan I'll be there soon," Nelson said carelessly.

Li Kin's eyes flickered to the emptied Scotch bottle, and he hesitated a moment. "Remember, we have to get away by morning."

"I'll be there," snapped Nelson and the little Chinese went silently out.

Eric Nelson looked after the little man with a sympathy he felt neither for himself nor his three other fellow-officers. Li Kin was a patriot, an absurdly impractical patriot whose fervent dreams had set his feet stumbling through the quagmire of China's civil wars to this blind-alley end.

The other three and he himself, Nelson thought with savage self-contempt, were not patriots, nor dreamers, nor anything but soldiers of fortune.

Soldiers of fortune? The phrase lent an ironical twist to his lips. He and his fellow mercenaries were so far removed from the gay, gallant connotations of that name. Nick Sloan was a cool ruthless self-seeker, Van Voss a moronic sadist, Lefty Wister a spidery criminal.

And he, Eric Nelson? He, least of all, fitted that glamorous name. He was thirty years old, and the best years of his life had no other memorial than forgotten battles for petty warlords from Shansi to Hupeh. And now, with no more warlords to fight for, he was a fugitive whose only out was to hire himself to Shan Kar's mountain people.

NELSON swept the empty Scotch bottle off the table to crash in splinters against the mud wall.

"Am I a dog to sit here untended?" he demanded of the fat Cantonese. "Bring another."

The liquor had lightened his somber mood by the time he went out into the night an hour later.

The few blinking lights along Yen Shi's wrecked and wretched streets danced in a

cheerful rosy glow as he stalked along.

"I'm tired of China anyway!" he thought as he elbowed between shadowy, shuffling peasants. "Shan Kar's mountains will be new, at least."

"L'Lan, L'Lan the golden, where the ancient Brotherhood still lives—"

Now what was this Brotherhood that the old seer had talked of so raptly? And if it was so important, why hadn't Shan Kar mentioned it?

ERIC NELSON stopped suddenly. Green eyes blazed at him from directly ahead in the gloom.

A huge tawny dog crouched there, staring at him. Only it wasn't a dog.

"A wolf," he told himself, as his hand went to the heavy pistol at his belt. "I'm not *that* drunk."

He was a little drunk, yes, but even so he could see that the beast was too big for a dog, its massive head too wide, its crouching tenseness too feral.

Its green eyes watched him with hypnotic intensity.

Nelson was deliberately raising his gun when a soft voice spoke from the darkness beyond the animal.

"He will not harm you," said a girl's voice in accented Tibetan dialect. "He is—mine."

She came toward him out of the shadows, past the crouching beast.

It was hard to see her clearly because Nelson's vision was obscured by the alcohol in his brain.

But he felt that this girl was special enough to justify the effort.

The way she moved, for one thing—she was light on her feet with a sort of gliding grace that belonged to an animal rather than to a town-bred human.

Nelson had never seen a woman move that way before and he wanted to see more of it—much more of it.

She wore the conventional dark jacket and trousers and at first he took it for granted that she was Chinese. Her hair was black enough, clustered around her shoulders as though she had brought part of the night with her into the lamplight. But it was soft wavy hair and the face it framed was the wrong color, a smooth, olive tan and the wrong shape.

Vaguely Nelson had a feeling that only recently he had somewhere seen an olive face like that, finely wrought and strong and just a little arrogant—only it had been a man's face.

Her great, grave dark eyes were looking up at him provocatively. Yet there was something oddly childlike about the innocence of her red mouth, the delicate tanned planes of her face.

"I am Nsharra, white lord," she said softly, her glance tilting to meet his eyes. "I have seen you in the village before the battle."

Nelson laughed. "I haven't seen you before. Nor that wolf-dog, either. I'd remember you both."

She came a step closer.

Through the alcoholic haze that fogged his mind Nelson saw her dark eyes studying him.

"You look tired and sad, lord," Nsharra murmured. "You are—lonely?"

Nelson's first impulse was to toss her a coin and be on his way. In his ten years in China he hadn't sunk so low as to meddle with village street-girls.

But this girl was different. It might be the Scotch that made her seem so but her smooth face and slumbrous eyes had a beauty that held him.

"My hut is very near," she was saying, looking up at him with an oddly shy little smile.

"And why not?" Nelson said suddenly in English. "What difference does it make now?"

NSHARRA understood his tone if not his words.

Her small hand on his arm guided him softly through the shadows.

The mud hut was on the fringe of the village. In the starlight Nelson saw the looming bulk of a great black stallion standing outside it.

The horse was fire-eyed, its ears alertly erect, yet it stood quietly and there was neither rope nor halter upon it.

"Yours?" Nelson said to her, and then laughed. "Good thing Nick Sloan hasn't seen him. He likes fine horses."

He was not completely drunk, not drunk at all, he told himself. He knew quite well the incongruity of a village sing-song girl owning a wolf-dog and a stallion but in his rosy, reckless mood he didn't pause to wonder or care.

The interior of the hut was a squalid cubicle that wavered out of darkness when

He hurled himself over the striking sword, saw terror widen the swordsman's eyes (CHAP. XIV)

the girl lit a candle. As she straightened Nelson took her into his arms.

For just a moment, Nsharra struggled, then relaxed. But her lips remained cool and unmoved under his.

"I have wine," she murmured, a little breathlessly. "Let me—"

The rice wine was a pungent fire in his throat and Nelson knew he should drink no more of it. But it was too easy to sit here on the soft mat and watch Nsharra's delicate, grave face as her slim hands refilled his cup.

"You will come again to see me, tomorrow or the next night, white lord?" she murmured, as she handed him the cup.

"The name is Eric Nelson and I won't be back tomorrow night for I won't be in Yen Shi," he laughed. "So tonight is all there is."

Her dark eyes fixed on his face, suddenly intent. "Then you and your comrades leave at once with Shan Kar?"

"Shan Kar?" The name brought a flash of memory to Nelson. "*Now* I remember whom you remind me of! You've got the same olive complexion, the same features and the same accent—"

He broke off, staring at her. "What do you know of Shan Kar anyway?"

Nsharra shrugged slim shoulders. "All the village knows that he is a stranger from the mountains and that he seeks to hire you and your comrades to go back to his land with him."

ERIC NELSON could believe that, for he had had past experience with the swiftness of gossip in a Chinese town. His fogged mind was still baffled, though, by the thing that didn't explain—the queer similarity between Shan Kar and Nsharra, as though they belonged to the same race.

All that didn't matter! What mattered was that this was the last night for him, that the girl's tapering fingers were light against his cheek, her breath warm in his ear.

Nelson gulped his wine and looked up from it to see the wolf-dog crouched in the open doorway of the hut, watching him with fixed, luminous green eyes.

And the great head and fiery eyes of the big stallion were watching too from out in the darkness. There was something perched on the stallion's back, something winged and rustling.

"Will you tell those two beasts to go away?" Nelson said thickly to the girl. "I don't like them. They look as though they were listening to every word."

The girl looked at the wolf-dog and horse. She did not speak. But wolf and stallion melted back into the darkness.

"Hatha and Tark mean no harm," Nsharra murmured soothingly. "They are my friends."

Deep in Nelson's mind, something in her words plucked another hidden string of memory, something that set up vaguely unpleasant vibrations in his brain.

But he couldn't think of that nor of the two queer beasts out there in the dark with his arm around Nsharra's pliant body and his lips on her soft mouth.

"Tark, do not kill! You were to watch, not to kill yet!"

The memory crashed suddenly through his mind, the memory of where he had heard that name before.

The weird dream of alien, menacing thought-voices, the flying shadow in his room and the sound of wings in the night—memory of them ripped the alcoholic fog from Eric Nelson's mind.

His hands suddenly gripped the girl's slim shoulders with bruising force.

"You said 'Tark!' " he rasped. "You said it before, when I thought I was dreaming. You were talking somehow to that wolf!"

The caution and suspicion that had kept him alive for ten years in China's wars were all on the alert at this moment, dominating Nelson.

He glared at the girl. "You got me here for a reason. You know Shan Kar, you're of his race. Why are you spying on him?"

Nsharra looked back into his accusing eyes, with a little hurt look on her delicate face. She spoke softly.

She said, "Kill now, Tark!"

The wolf-dog was a dark thunderbolt that leaped in from the doorway and knocked Nelson sprawling as Nsharra jerked swiftly back.

Nelson made one abortive gesture toward his gun and then knew that, before he could draw it, his throat would be cut. He wrapped bis arms around his own neck as he rolled with the wolf-dog's hairy weight on top of him.

He felt needle-sharp fangs rip his forearm. The most horrible part of the moment was that the wolf-dog sought his life in complete silence, without growl or snarl.

Then the great stallion screamed outside

the hut and a gun roared. Nelson heard Nsharra's flying feet and silvery cry.

"Tark! Hatha—Ei! We go!"

"*Nelson!*" yelled Li Kin's startled voice.

Nelson became aware that the wolf-dog was no longer atop him. He scrambled to his feet, dazed and shaken.

The hut was empty. He stumbled to the door, and caromed into Li Kin. The little Chinese officer had his automatic in his hand and wore a stunned look in his spectacled eyes.

"I followed you, Nelson!" he babbled. "I saw you come to this hut with the girl but when I came near the stallion attacked me! I shot at it and missed."

"The girl? Where's the girl now?" Nelson cried. He was cold sober now and his daze was dissolving in red anger.

"She and the wolf burst out, knocked me over and fled!" Li Kin cried. "See, there they go!"

Nelson got a shadowy glimpse of a stallion and rider and a slinking wolf-shape racing westward down the dusty road in the uncertain starlight.

OVER stallion, rider and wolf, moving west with them against the stars, flew a winged black soaring thing.

"There was something on the stallion's back when I came!" Li Kin exclaimed. "An eagle or other great bird—it's queer!"

"It's more than queer," rasped Eric Nelson. He gripped the slashed forearm that was beginning to throb and burn. "Come on—I want to see this man Shan Kar!"

Li Kin kept recurring to the beasts as they slogged hastily through dark dusty streets toward the inn.

"She spoke to them, as though they were people! She was like a witch, a mistress of *kuei*, with her familiars!"

"Will you forget those animals?" Nelson snapped.

He was angry and he was angry because he was a little afraid. He had been afraid before, many times, but not of something as uncanny as this, not of a girl and three beasts and a dream.

The dark courtyard of the inn echoed with the stamping and trampling of scores of hoofs. Shaggy little ponies were squealing and biting in protest as Nick Sloan and Lefty and Van Voss loaded the heavy packs from the arsenal onto them.

Nelson found Shan Kar in the corner of the courtyard, a dark, tense figure impatiently watching the hurried preparations.

"Just who is Nsharra?" Nelson asked him flatly.

Shan Kar turned like a goaded leopard. The light from the inn's window showed the narrowed gleam of the man's eyes.

"What do you know of Nsharra?" asked Shan Kar.

"She's one of your own people, isn't she?" Nelson pressed. "She comes from L'Lan too?"

Shan Kar's handsome face was taut and dark.

"What do you know of Nsharra?" he repeated dangerously.

Eric Nelson knew then that he had failed in his attempt to surprise full explanation from the other.

Li Kin broke in excitedly. "A girl with a stallion and a wolf and an eagle! They would have killed Nelson if I had not interrupted! But they got away!"

Shan Kar, staring beyond them, spoke softly between his teeth. "Nsharra here—and Tark and Hatha and Ei too! Then they have followed me and watched me."

"Who is she? What does it mean?" Nelson demanded.

Shan Kar answered with brooding slowness. "She is daughter of Kree, Guardian of the Brotherhood—the enemies of my people!"

He added tightly, "And it means that the Brotherhood is striking at us even before we reach L'Lan. We must go swiftly if we are ever to reach the valley!"

CHAPTER III

Into Mystery

THEY had gone swiftly. Two weeks and a half a thousand miles of the wildest mountains on earth, lay behind them. They were still climbing as the fifteenth day gathered toward the explosive climax of sunset.

Eric Nelson looked back down the shoulder of the great gray mountain and saw the little line of heavily-laden pack-ponies crawling up the trail after him like a disjointed hairy snake.

Ahead of them the treeless slope they climbed went up to a ridge against the sky

like a springboard into infinity. Against the glory of fusing colors that fired the western heavens, Shan Kar and his mount loomed bigger than life.

Shan Kar stopped suddenly, pointed skyward and uttered a yell.

"Now what?" exclaimed Nick Sloan, riding beside Nelson. "Do you suppose he's sighted his valley? He said we would tonight."

"No, something's wrong!" Eric Nelson said quickly. He spurred forward, his tired shaggy pony manfully responding.

They reached Shan Kar at the very crest of the ridge. From here they looked westward toward another and parallel gigantic mountain range. Its highest, northern peaks were snow-capped and beyond it was a dim stupendous vista of still other ranges.

Between this next great rampart and the one on whose crest they stood yawned a deep gorge, wooded thickly with fir and poplar and larch. Shadows were already deepening in the forests down there.

This was the mountain wilderness that stretched between the southeastern Kunlun Ranges and Koko Nor. And it was still one of the least-known parts of Earth.

War-planes had flown over this mountainous no-man's-land in the last few years. A few explorers like Hedin had, at great peril, toiled across sectors of it. But most of it was as little-known as when the French missionaries, Huc and Gabet, had trudged through it a hundred years before. There was little here to tempt exploration, and there were hostile Tibetan and Mongol tribes to discourage it.

"Your guns!" Shan Kar was shouting as Nelson and Sloan rode up. "Shoot them, quickly!"

He was pointing skyward. Bewildered, Eric Nelson looked up. There was nothing in the fire-shot heavens but two eagles planing down a thousand feet above the ridge.

"There's nothing up there—" Nelson began puzzledly, when Shan Kar interrupted.

"The eagles! Kill them or our danger is great!"

It hit Nelson in the face. It brought back all the uncanny memory of Nsharra and her weird animal companions—a memory he had deliberately sought to rationalize and forget during the two weeks' trek.

Shan Kar was in deadly earnest. His black eyes glared hatred and fear at the two black winged shapes swooping in smooth circles through the sunset.

"Cursed native superstitions!" Nick Sloan grunted. "But I suppose we have to humor him."

Sloan had unslung his rifle from his saddle. He aimed at the lowest of the two black-winged shapes and fired.

There was a horrid, shrill scream across the heavens. It did not come from the eagle that was suddenly plummeting earthward with crumpled wings.

It came from the other great bird and, as it screamed, it was swiftly hurtling upward and westward in flight.

"The other!" cried Shan Kar. "He must not get away!"

Sloan fired again, and again. But the second eagle was already a receding dot against the sunset.

Shan Kar clenched his fists, staring after it. "He'll take word to L'Lan. But maybe—"

He started in a run toward the spot farther down the ridge where the first eagle had fallen.

"What the—?" Sloan exclaimed, lowering his rifle. "Is he crazy?"

"Native superstition of some kind," Eric Nelson said but was coldly conscious that he did not believe it himself.

The two eagles, in their purposeful reconnoitering of the pack-train, had been too uncannily reminiscent of Nsharra's strangely purposeful horse and wolf and eagle.

LI KIN and the Cockney had come up. Lefty Wister's pinched red face was glistening with alarm.

"What happened? And what's the bloody native doing down there?"

They could see that Shan Kar, farther down the ridge, had reached the fallen eagle. Nelson and the others followed hastily.

The eagle was not dead. Its wing had been broken by Sloan's bullet and it had been flopping away across the rocky ridge in evident effort to escape when Shan Kar stopped it.

Shan Kar looped a hide thong about the great bird's legs, hobbling it. The eagle, a magnificent creature of glistening black plumage and white-crested head, glared at Shan Kar with wonderful golden eyes, trying to strike with its beak.

Shan Kar grasped the crippled wing of the eagle by the tip and deliberately twisted it, tormenting the great bird.

"What the devil!" flamed Nelson. "Put the thing out of its misery!"

The eagle glanced at him swiftly with a flash of golden eyes. It was as though the bird understood. It brought Nelson creepy memory of the intent, intelligent look in the eyes of Nsharra's beasts—of Tark, the wolf, and Hatha, the stallion!

"Let me alone," Shan Kar said tightly, without turning his gaze from the eagle's eyes. "This is necessary."

"Necessary—to torture a dumb animal?" Nelson snapped.

"He can tell me what I must know," Shan Kar retorted. "And he is no dumb animal. He is one of the Brotherhood, of our enemies."

"Blimey, the man's cracked!" exclaimed Lefty Wister.

Shan Kar disregarded them all. He was staring fixedly into the splendid eyes of the wounded bird.

Nelson almost thought he could hear question and answer, inside his mind. Telepathic questions put by Shan Kar—and stubborn, defiant answer by the crippled eagle!

Could man and beast talk telepathically? His weird dream flashed back into his memory. Shan Kar, eyes narrowing, suddenly twisted the crippled wing again. A spasm of agony shook the eagle.

It turned its head convulsively, looked up at Eric Nelson. In that look, Nelson read tortured pain—and appeal!

His pistol came into his hand and cracked. The head of the eagle became a bloody mess and its wings relaxed in death.

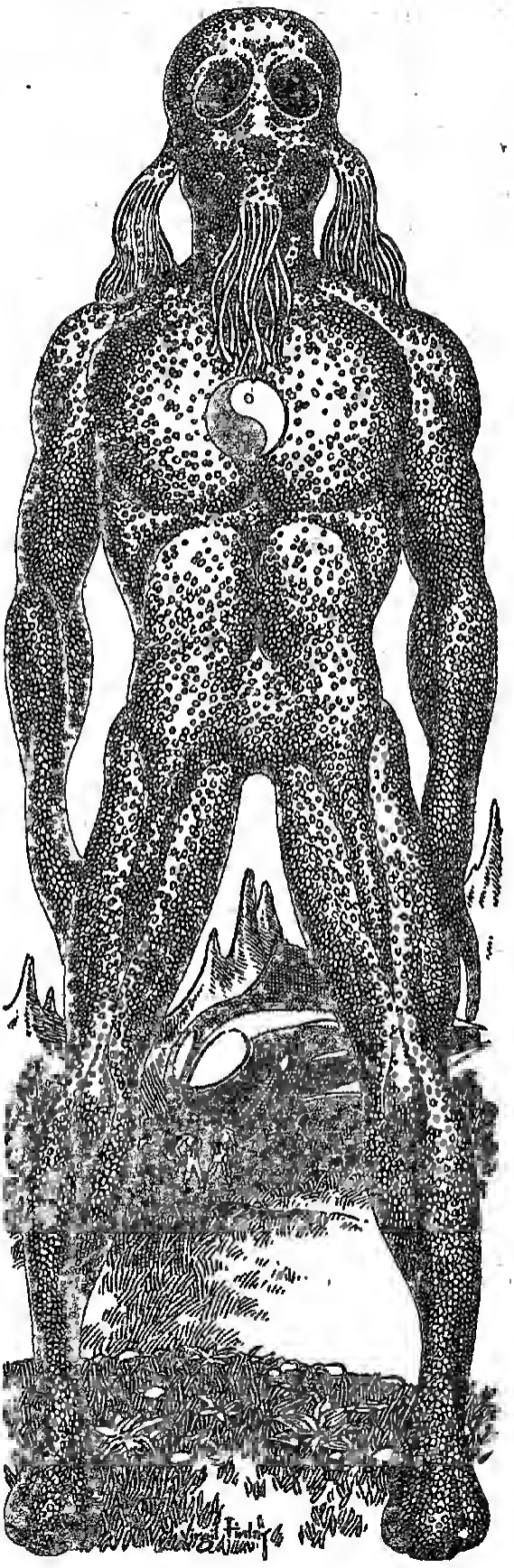
Shan Kar leaped to his feet, his eyes flaming as he faced Nelson. "You should not have done that! I would have made him tell me!"

"Tell you what? What could an eagle tell you?" Sloan demanded incredulously.

Shan Kar made a visible effort to repress his anger. He spoke rapidly, his fierce eyes sweeping them.

"We can't camp here now. We must move on tonight, and move fast. The Brotherhood will be out after us now that the other winged one has taken back word of our coming."

His hands clenched. "I feared it would be so! Nsharra has reached L'Lan before us with warning and they have watchers out—like those two."



"Our crippled ship crashed upon this planet, in this valley." (CHAP. XVII)

"What is this Brotherhood?" Eric Nelson demanded.

"I will explain that later, when we reach L'Lan," answered the other.

Nelson took a step forward. "You will explain now. It's time we got the truth about what faces us in L'Lan."

Nick Sloan, his flat brown face hard and suspicious, harshly seconded Nelson. "That's right, Shan Kar. It seems we're up against more than just a tribal war. Spill it or we'll backtrack out of here."

Shan Kar smiled thinly. "You want the platinum we can pay you. You won't go back to China to be shot."

"Not to China—but we can cross southward over the Kunlun into Tibet," Sloan spat. "Don't think you have us in your hand. You need us worse than we need you. Talk or we walk out."

Shan Kar eyed them, his mind obviously busy behind the handsome olive mask of his face. Then he shrugged.

"There is not time to tell you everything. We *must* move fast or we are lost. Also—you would not believe all if I told you."

He hesitated. "This much I will tell you. There are two factions in L'Lan. One is the party of the Humanites, of which I am one of the leaders. The other party is the Brotherhood.

"We Humanites are all men and women as our name implies. We believe in the superiority of humanity to all other forms of life and are ready to fight for it. But the Brotherhood, our enemies, *are not all men!*"

Sloan stared. "What do you mean? What are those of the Brotherhood who are not men?"

"Beasts!" hissed Shan Kar. "Beasts who assert their equality with men! Yes, in L'Lan the wolf and tiger and eagle claim themselves the equals of humans!"

HIS black eyes flashed. "And they'll not stop there! The winged ones and the hairy ones and the clawed ones—all the forest clans—will eventually aspire to dominance over man! Is it strange that we Humanites are preparing to crush them before that can happen?"

There was stunned silence for a moment, then Lefty Wister's shrill laughter crowed. "Didn't I tell you the man was cracked? We've come half into Tibet on a wild-goose chase with a crazy native for guide!"

Nick Sloan's face darkened and he started toward Shan Kar. Eric Nelson intervened hastily.

"Sloan, wait! That platinum was real enough!"

Sloan stopped. "So it was. And we're going to find its source. But we won't find it by listening to crazy talk of wild beasts plotting against men!"

"The beasts of the Brotherhood are not the brute beasts of your outer world!" flared Shan Kar. "They are intelligent, as intelligent as men."

He made a fierce gesture. "I knew you would not believe! It was why I dared not tell you! But *you* at least should know I speak truth!" He pointed to Nelson.

Nelson felt a queer chill. He *did* have an uncanny conviction that Shan Kar was speaking the truth. But the impossible couldn't be true. A witch-girl and her pets, a crippled eagle, a queer native's fantastic talk—was he for these to throw away his firm footing on the everyday earth?

" 'L'Lan the golden where the ancient Brotherhood still lives,' " whispered Li Kin, quoting. "So that is what it means?"

Nick Sloan snapped the spell. "This is all moonshine but we can talk it out later! Right now I want to know what the danger is that you claim threatens us! How far are we now from L'Lan?"

Shan Kar pointed at the great wall of mountains that rose on the other side of the deep wooded gorge.

"The valley L'Lan lies on the other side of those mountains. We are that close! But getting into it will be perilous now."

He hurried on. "There is only one pass into the valley. It leads into it near the city Vruun which is the heart of the Brotherhood. Yet we must pass Vruun to reach Anshan, the city in the south which we Humanites hold.

"I hoped to creep through the pass and past Vruun without detection. But if the Brotherhood's scout gets word back of our coming they'll move to block us at the pass. That is why we must hurry!"

Nelson and Sloan and the other three grasped at least the urgency of the situation. They had, all of them, fought too many battles and made too many forced marches, not to understand strategy.

Eric Nelson told Sloan, "We'd better move as he says. We can get him to explain his queer statements later."

Sloan nodded, frowning. "He's either a

liar or a superstitious fool. We'll find out later. Right now I smell trouble."

The sun was setting. Darkness came with a swift rush as Shan Kar led their little caravan down into the wooded gorge.

The forest was a dark tangle of fir, scrub-oak and poplar. Beneath it, the brush was tindery and crackling from the long dry season. A mountain-stream brawled noisily along in the night somewhere nearby.

Shan Kar knew the trails. He turned southward and they moved after him, their ponies stumbling in the dark, Lefty Wister swearing in a monotonous whine each time his little steed staggered.

A cold wind whined down from the black mountains on their right. The trees stirred mournfully. Eric Nelson had a sudden strongly claustrophobic awareness of the huge ranges that shut them into this wild and forgotten pocket of the globe.

A wolf howled, a long swelling cry that came from somewhere up in the wooded slopes on the west side of the gorge.

Shan Kar turned in his saddle. "Faster!" he rasped.

Nelson was drawn by some instinct to look up and, through the tracery of branches overhead, saw a dark, winged shape plane swiftly above the gorge. It was high, moving in searching loops and curves.

It screamed, an eagle cry echoing thinly down from the night. Almost at once the distant wolf-cry came again.

Shan Kar abruptly reined in his pony. "They know we're coming! I must try to learn what faces us inside L'Lan!"

He had dismounted. Fumbling under his cloak, he brought out something that glinted oddly in the starlight.

Then Nelson glimpsed what it was—the hoop of platinum with the two quartz disks mounted on it, that odd ornament or instrument which had sparked the treasure-lure of their quest.

"What the—!" Sloan exploded harshly. "If there's danger, we've no time to waste here!"

"Wait!" commanded Shan Kar. "Wait and be silent! All depends on whether I can contact my friends!"

He had put the platinum hoop upon his head like a crown. He crouched, his strange headgear glistening vaguely.

Nelson felt incredulous wonder. What was Shan Kar doing with the odd thing? What was it?

CHAPTER IV

Hidden Land

THE moon was rising. As it gleamed above the mountains east of them, its lambent light poured down into the dark forest of the gorge like quicksilver trickling through a sieve.

Shan Kar remained crouched as a pool of the vague light widened around him. The little quartz disks on the headpiece of platinum he wore caught the light and shone brilliantly. The man's olive face was taut, his eyes stared, unseeing, into the darkness.

"What is it? What has happened now?" came Li Kin's anxious voice from the darkness.

Behind the little Chinese, Eric Nelson heard the rattle of the ponies' hoofs on stones and Lefty Wister cursing steadily.

"Cursed native mumbo-jumbo, that's all!" swore Nick Sloan. "Are we going to stand here all night?"

Nelson laid a hand on the other's sleeve. "Wait, Sloan. Shan Kar seems to know what he's doing."

Again a wolf howled, this time a lonely wailing single cry, echoing away, infinitely pregnant with menace.

Shan Kar finally broke his taut immobility, leaping to his feet and jerking the platinum circlet from his head.

"I have talked with my people in Anshan. They warn that a force of the Brotherhood is on its way to cut us off inside the pass, and that their own warriors can't reach us in time to help!"

Talked? Talked how, Nelson wondered swiftly? Had mind somehow spoken to distant mind through the agency of the platinum crown? But how could a people who were desperate to obtain the ordinary weapons of the outer world, possess such a super-scientific instrument as that implied?

Shan Kar was continuing urgently. "We must get up through the pass and into L'Lan before they block us! All depends on that!"

Nelson shared the bafflement of the others. In this outlandish situation, they couldn't estimate the true magnitude of perils.

"How many men have the Brotherhood, your enemies, sent out to cut us off?" he demanded.

"Perhaps not many *men,*" answered Shan Kar. "But they have many who are not men. Too many for us."

"More superstition," spat Nick Sloan, disgustedly. "He's trying to tell us there are intelligent beasts coming against us."

Nelson hesitated. "This Brotherhood may use trained beasts as fighters at that. Such a fight would be plenty messy. Especially in a narrow pass."

Again, he was forced to make a quick decision based on information whose sources seemed too fantastic to be credited.

"Get the ponies moving!" he ordered. "Whatever danger may be ahead, we'd be better off to meet it inside the valley than up in that pass."

They started climbing out of the great gorge, Shan Kar leading them up a trail that twisted amid giant boulders and gaunt firs. Soon they glimpsed above them the crack of a pass that split the titanic moonlit wall of the range.

A pulse-quickening sense of expectation spurred Eric Nelson as he helped drag the ponies upward. What lay within that mighty wall of mountains, what guarded answer to the mysteries that seemed to deepen around them hour by hour?

They came up clear of the last trees onto naked rock and shingle with the last lofty rampart of the range looming before them. The pass was a mere narrow crack through that rampart.

It was a place of shadows and shivering cold. The ponies' hoofs clattered on the loose rock as they rode through.

They came out onto an open ledge of moonlight, and Shan Kar leaned in his saddle to gesture ahead.

"L'Lan!"

It looked like a valley of dreams, to Eric Nelson. It looked like a place he had visited in some former life and had never quite forgotten.

It was a pear-shaped land fifty miles long, completely walled in by towering ranges that stepped up toward stupendous, snow-crowned peaks at the northern, narrow end of the pear.

The pass at whose outlet they sat their ponies was some twelve miles from the northern end of the valley and nearly a mile above its floor. They looked down into a land silvered by the rising moon.

"Where is the city of your own people?" Nick Sloan demanded brusquely of Shan Kar.

The other pointed southward. "That way—out of sight. But Vruun, the city of the Brotherhood, is *there!*"

He was pointing north of due west. Eric Nelson followed the direction of his finger.

Nelson had already noticed the big river that flowed down the valley, whose every sprawling loop caught the moon. Now he saw a little cluster of lights beside it near the north end of the valley.

VRUUN, city of the mysterious Brotherhood? Nelson strained his eyes. He glimpsed around the lights a mass of vague, glimmering structures that were oddly enlaced by the surrounding forest.

Nelson caught his breath. Unless the light tricked him, Vruun could be like no Asiatic city he had ever seen.

"But what—" he began, turning to Shan Kar.

He didn't finish. The cry that came echoing faintly up out of the great moonlit valley, struck him silent.

Hai—ooo!

No human cry was that but one he had heard before in the uplands. The hunting call of wolves, of many wolves.

Hai—ooo! Hai—ooo!

The ponies jumped nervously. Shan Kar's voice rang urgent above the clatter of their hoofs.

"Tark's clan race ahead to cut us off! We must ride fast for Anshan!"

"These pack-ponies can't *go* fast!" Nick Sloan started to object and was silenced by the grim reply.

"They will!"

They rode pell-mell down slippery rock slopes, Shan Kar leading them southward. And forest came darkly up to meet them—black forest of fir and larch and cedar that seemed to clothe much of the great valley.

Each of them led one of the pack-ponies. Nelson noted that the heavily-burdened, shaggy little horse he led was nervously running with all its strength.

"The Hairy Ones can go faster than we but we have a start!" rang Shan Kar's voice from ahead. "All depends upon which of the Brotherhood are out!"

A few minutes later, as though to answer him, a squalling cat-scream drifted from far behind them—a screech of feline anger.

"Quorr and his clawed ones, too!" cried

Shan Kar. "And Ei's scouts wing ahead!"

Nelson had already glimpsed the dark shapes of great winged things sliding fast above the forest, only momentarily visible through the tangle of black foliage against the silvered sky.

Ei's folks—eagles of the Brotherhood! Nelson saw three of them sweeping overhead, then circling back.

Abruptly they emerged from the forest onto rolling moonlit plain.

"Those are the lights of Anshan!" Shan Kar called back over the rush of wind. "See!"

Nelson glimpsed a few closely grouped lights far ahead in the moonlit vagueness of the valley. Then they were lost to view as the party galloped down into a declivity of the plain.

Hai—ooo!

Wolf-clan of the Brotherhood shouted to each other as they raced down the valley in pursuit!

Nelson thought, "I should be wondering if all this isn't a crazy dream. Only I know it isn't!"

No dream—no! The great peaks that walled L'Lan loomed lofty and clear in the moonlight. The wind smacked his face with irritating persistence, a twisted stirrup-leather was rubbing his leg raw.

Again the lights of Anshan came into view as they topped another rise in the plain. At the same moment, Lefty Wister uttered a strangled yell.

"Blimy, they're—"

It was choked from his lips. Nelson, turning in the saddle, glimpsed the dark wolf-shape that was dragging the Cockney from his frantically bucking pony.

Black leaping forms were all about them, eyes and teeth gleaming in the moonlight. Eagle-wings threshed the night close overhead.

Nelson had his pistol out but his own pony was so frantic with fear that he could not fire. He heard a Dutch curse from Van Voss.

"Off saddle before they pull us down one by one!" Nelson yelled, making a split-second decision. "Stick together—*here!*"

He was sliding from the saddle as he spoke, holding his scared pony's reins. A black bulk came at him in soundless rush and he triggered his automatic.

The staccato bark of the gun seemed momentarily to startle the dark beast-forms that were now all around them. As the creatures wavered, Van Voss shot the wolf that had dragged Lefty down.

The Cockney staggered up, a forearm slashed and bleeding, mouthing curses. Nick Sloan and Li Kin were already dismounted and Shan Kar was leaping catlike with a short sword from beneath his cloak.

"Help me get the tommy-guns out!" Nick Sloan shouted.

"Look out!" came Li Kin's scared cry. "There are *men* with them!"

ERIC NELSON was later to remember this as the moment in which he first realized the fantastic otherworldliness of this valley.

For with the dark beasts charging them now came mounted men—men and horses who companioned wolf and tiger and eagle, men who wore queer metal skull-cap helmets and breastplates and wielded swords.

"There is Tark with Barin!" yelled Shan Kar.

[*Turn page*]

Tark? Nelson's heart jumped. The great wolf who had been Nsharra's comrade, who had nearly had his throat out at Yen Shi?

Then he saw the wolf. He glimpsed that massive hairy head plunging forward beside an iron-gray horse on which sat a yelling, sword-wielding young man in helmet and breastplate.

Nelson and Li Kin and the Cockney had their rifles off their saddles and fired at the dark forms charging through the moonlight.

"Kill the men!" Nelson yelled. "The brutes will run off if we get their masters!"

He knew almost as he said it that it was not so, that his incredulity and accustomed habits of thinking were deceiving him.

For these beasts were intelligent. They showed it by the way in which wolf and tiger came on in irregular zig-zag leaps to avoid the rifle-fire that was obviously new to them.

IN ONE sense, it was like all the battles in which Eric Nelson had ever engaged. There was the same sense of crazy confusion, the lack of a clear pattern, the feeling of being caught in a random collision of forces in which personal effort counted for nothing.

Then, as always, the fight suddenly crystallized. The youth whom Shan Kar had called Barin was shouting in a high, ringing voice, the other horsemen and the great beasts gathering toward him.

"Stand clear!" yelled Sloan, from behind.

Nelson and the others jumped aside and Sloan and Van Voss let go with the submachine-guns they had hastily unpacked.

The chattering storm of lead broke full on the human and beast attackers massing for charge. Blood-chilling horse-screams and cat-squalls ripped the din as mounted men and beasts crashed.

"They are beaten—they cannot face your outland weapons!" cried Shan Kar. "See, they flee!"

The beasts and the few horsemen left were dropping back, retreating from that deadly fire. Tiger-squall and wolf-howl rose and fell swiftly. Hoofs drummed the plain.

Then Nelson heard a long, clear eagle-scream from far up in the moonlit sky. There followed comparative silence. Shan Kar, sword in hand, was bounding out toward the dark bodies dotting the plain.

"Nelson, what kind of place is this valley?" came Sloan's shaken voice. "Wolves, tigers, eagles—"

"Kuei!" exclaimed Li Kin tremulously. "Shan Kar spoke truth! Brute and men are equal here—at least, in the Brotherhood!"

They heard Shan Kar yell something and plunged forward after him. They were in time to witness an astounding spectacle. Shan Kar, sword in hand, was tensely approaching a mighty, crouching wolf that had been attempting to drag away a man's limp form.

"It's Tark!" cried Shan Kar. "He was trying to drag Barin away!"

Eric Nelson glimpsed the flaring green eyes of the great wolf as it turned its face toward them. It did not snarl, as an ordinary beast would have done. It merely crouched for an instant, seeming to choose its victim swiftly before it sprang.

Nelson, startled, raised his rifle as the wolf launched itself for his throat. Shan Kar yelled at the same instant.

"Don't kill him if you can help it! He's valuable to us alive!"

The wolf would have died despite that cry had Nelson been able to shoot in time. But the spring was too swift for that. Nelson, involuntarily stepping back from the blazing-eyed charge as he raised his gun, tripped and stumbled.

He just glimpsed the terrific swing of Sloan's heavy gun as the other batted with it at the plunging wolf.

He heard the thud of the blow, felt Tark's massive, hairy weight hit him—but limply. Then he scrambled hastily from beneath the motionless body of the stunned wolf.

"We've got Tark alive and Barin, Kree's son, too!" Shan Kar exclaimed. "And we've given the Brotherhood its first taste of our new weapons!"

The man was ablaze with exultation and excitement. Nelson looked down at the two bodies. The wolf still lay senseless and the youth Barin was bleeding from a crease-wound across the temple.

Nick Sloan looked more shaken than Nelson had ever seen him as he stared at the dead beasts that lay there on the moonlit plain.

"Nelson, these brutes are *intelligent!*" he panted. "Running with men, fighting as allies of men."

"Kuei!" repeated Li Kin, his saffron face pallid in the silver light. "A valley of witches and devils!"

Shan Kar interrupted. "More of the Brotherhood will be here swiftly. We must

ride on fast for Anshan or die here on the plain!"

He was, as he spoke, kneeling to lash hide thongs securely about the feet of the stunned wolf.

Tark, the wolf, stirred as Shan Kar finished the task. The green eyes of the great beast flickered open. Then, seeing Shan Kar binding the youth, Barin, the wolf's lips writhed away back from great fangs in a soundless snarl.

Shan Kar finished binding the youth, turned and laughed full in the face of the wolf.

"Tark the mighty, trapped like a tame outland dog!" He jeered at the great beast. "Did Kree send you to guard his stripling son? A potent guardian!"

The wolf made no sound but his green eyes blazed an intelligent hatred of his mocker that made Eric Nelson's skin crawl.

"Riders are coming from the south!" Nick Sloan shouted suddenly. "Get ready!"

CHAPTER V

Wolf Hatred

NELSON and the others raised their weapons as a dull clatter of many hoofs grew swiftly louder.

"Wait!" cried Shan Kar. "They are my own people from Anshan! Do not shoot!"

In the moonlight, Nelson presently made out a band of horsemen galloping toward them from the south. They wore armor much like that of their recent attackers, skullcap helmets and breastplates of metal. Swords gleamed in the moon. For a moment, Nelson thought that the new-come horsemen would ride right onto them.

But they pulled up sharply. A burly, bearlike warrior tumbled from his steed and strode toward Shan Kar with noisy greetings. Shan Kar, after brief colloquy, called to Eric Nelson and the others.

"Holk and these warriors came out to escort us to Anshan. But we mustn't delay. The scouts of the Winged Ones will have the whole Brotherhood down on us if we do."

Nelson heard the warriors exchanging fierce exultant words. Their dialect was not Tibetan but so much akin to that ancient tongue that he could catch most of the phrases.

"—Kree's son himself and the Hairy One!" the bearlike Holk was shouting. "We'll make the Brotherhood squirm now!"

Nelson found Lefty Wister bleeding from a slash in his forearm but not badly injured. The little Cockney was shaken.

"They weren't wolves!" he panted. "They were men that can change like the old stories! They must be that!"

The two prisoners—the bound, senseless youth and the wolf—had already been lifted and slung across horses by the warriors of Holk, two of whom were to ride double.

"Why don't you just kill them?" Lefty demanded viciously of Shan Kar.

The other shook his head peremptorily. "No, these two captives are worth much to us Humanites! We take them to Anshan! Mount quickly, for we ride!"

Nelson's thoughts drummed in unison with the thudding of hoofs as they galloped with Shan Kar and Holk's warriors across the rolling moonlit plain. His mind was bewildered, trying to reconcile this fantastic valley with the ordinary world.

L'Lan was not of that world. That much was sure. This hidden pocket of Earth held a way of life of man and beast unheard of on the rest of the planet. Here reigned an ancient and unearthly way of life—one even now moving toward a climax of conflict within itself.

"Captain Nelson, to think it is all true!" came Li Kin's exclamation. "L'Lan, the legendary valley of the Brotherhood, unchanged!"

"Perish old legends!" Nelson thought. There was some normal explanation for all this. There must be.

The helmeted, sword-armed warriors who rode around him were like no ordinary Asiatic tribesmen, but Asia was vast and held queer racial survivals in its hidden places. The uncanny community of men and beasts here surely had other explanation than that the beasts were as intelligent as the men.

"Anshan!" called Shan Kar, from where he rode at the head of the mounted band.

Nelson perceived that they were riding down a gentle slope of the moonlit plain toward a city whose lights glimmered near the shore of the valley L'Lan's big woods-bordered river.

He didn't like the way the city looked in

the moonlight. It was not large, an oval stretching along the river less than a mile. But it looked too strange, too much like the disturbing impression he had obtained in his vague glimpse of distant Vruun.

It was a city interpenetrated by forest, by the low, dark woods that bordered the river. The forest came into Anshan as though by right, was woven into its design in wide windings of dense foliage.

"What kind of place is this?" demanded Nick Sloan, startled. "Those domes and towers are black glass!"

Black glass? It could not be that, surely. Yet every surface shimmered blackly and brilliantly in the moon, as though vitreous.

Like big bubbles of glittering jet, the spherical buildings loomed above the enlacing foliage. The round, slim towers, with queer openings and balconies at their tops, pointed skyward like ebony fingers.

Lights within the city were reflected by a thousand curving surfaces of glass, were splintered and shattered into broken beams and sparkles.

"This place doesn't belong on Earth at all!" Li Kin exclaimed.

Eric Nelson realized that this was what upset him so badly. It was not merely the presence of a big unknown city in this hidden corner of Asia. There were many such.

IT WAS the fact that the city Anshan matched in strangeness the strange beast-and-human folk of the valley L'Lan, that it bulked and glittered here like a city fallen to earth from another, alien planet.

They rode through the enlacing, whispering woods into the bubble-city. And Eric Nelson realized then that this city was old.

He had seen Angkor brooding in its jungles and the thousand towers of Pagan lonesome against the Burmese sky. But this place, though not a ruin, looked infinitely more ancient.

It was the weirdness of the wide windings of forest which interlaced the city that made Anshan seem older than human history. No completely human city had ever been so built. Even aside from the dark silent forest-ways within it, the city was too big for the number of its people. Few people were in its streets, few lights glimmered from the doorways of the bubble-buildings.

Yet men and women, clad alike in silken jackets and trousers, except for a few armed warriors like those they rode with, ran toward their clattering troop. Shan Kar gave them a proud wave of his hand.

"Shan Kar has returned with the outlanders and their weapons!" ran an excited cry.

"I don't get it!" Nick Sloan said, his harsh voice puzzled. "A big city like this—yet they're crazy over a few machine-guns!"

They rode up toward a complex of black, bubble-like buildings surrounded by a wide belt of tall trees, into which all the strange dark forest-windings of the city seemed to lead. The warrior Holk and his men, with their two captives, went on around the buildings. But Shan Kar drew rein and dismounted.

"You need not talk with me and the other Humanite leaders until morning," he told Nelson. "You must be tired."

Tired? Nelson had not realized the full depth of his weariness until he dismounted. Bone-crushing fatigue made him reel. But, as always, the responsibilities of leadership stiffened him.

"You'll have our packs of weapons unloaded?" he said to Shan Kar. "They must remain with us, of course."

Shan Kar's face and voice were smooth. "There is no need. They will be well guarded."

"Yes," Nelson nodded stolidly. "By us. In unskilled hands they would be dangerous."

The other's eyes narrowed but he shrugged. He called, and armored warriors appeared and picked up the heavy packs. They carried them after Shan Kar and the five outlanders, into the building.

They went through a big open doorway, like that of a cathedral, into a great entrance hall. It was broad and high-arched, a dusky, empty immensity ill-lit by torches of resinous wood that flamed in rude sockets hacked in the walls.

Torches in this shimmering lofty hall of faery-like black glass? The sight of them startled Eric Nelson. It was like finding tallow candles in a modern New York apartment.

He noted other incongruities as they were led through corridors to a suite of small rooms. Dust clung to the floors everywhere. And in the rooms assigned them were wooden chairs and bedframes, clean in workmanship but primitive compared to

the palace itself.

Shan Kar, as the grunting warriors piled up the heavy packs and left, told them, "Food will be brought soon. You will want to sleep. In the morning we will talk."

Nick Sloan's flat voice broke in. "Yes, in the morning we will talk—about platinum."

The other's face tightened a little, but he nodded. "That and other things." He went out, and Nick Sloan stared after him with suspicion hardening his flat brown face.

He muttered, "He's too cursed cagey to suit me. I've an idea there's a joker in his offer."

Eric Nelson almost envied Sloan's hard singleness of purpose. The increasingly disturbing mystery of this strange valley of men and beasts had not deviated the other a hair from his goal. Lack of imagination and of sympathy served Sloan well.

A frightened-looking olive-skinned girl in silk brought them food in earthenware bowls and platters—coarse wheaten cakes, a mush of cooked vegetables and a jar of yellow wine.

Nelson drank heavily. Then fatigue crushed him down like a giant, gentle hand onto one of the low beds.

Time unreeled backwards as his tired brain sank into darkness. L'Lan was a dream and ten years of China were a dream and he was back in his old slant-walled bedroom under the eaves of an Ohio farmhouse.

HE DID not awaken until sunlight splashed his face. The others were waking, rubbing bleared eyes and unshaven faces, looking wonderingly around the black, glassy rooms.

The bearlike warrior captain, Holk, came in as they finished breakfast. He said curtly, "If you're ready to come we'll talk now."

"Talk with whom?" Eric Nelson demanded. "Who, exactly, runs things here?"

Holk shrugged big shoulders. "We Humanites are not a government yet. We're a faction that seceded from the rest of L'Lan. Shan Kar and I and Diril and old Jurnak have been the leaders."

The two called Diril and Jurnak, a thoughtful-looking younger man and a bearded oldster, were waiting for them outside the room and went with them through the curving glass corridors.

The place was all of black glass. But not ordinary glass. That, Nelson knew, could not have supported such stresses and strains. This city was of an unknown material. A miracle-city, a city that might have come from another planet, hidden here in deepest Asia and inhabited by a semi-civilized people! It didn't make sense.

Holk paused, Nelson and the others with him, at the entrance of a spacious hall like the heart of a huge black pearl. But here too dust dimmed the gracious curves, the furniture was primitive.

"What's Shan Kar doing?" demanded Nick Sloan as they looked into the hall.

"He's still talking with Tark," said Holk.

Eric Nelson felt a shock of astonishment as he looked at the strange scene in the dusty glimmering glass hall.

Near the far wall of the room, secured by a heavy throat-chain to a massive staple in the wall, crouched the giant wolf Tark. Shan Kar sat in front of the wolf, looking silently down into the brooding, smoldering green eyes of the beast.

"Talking? But no one is *saying* anything!" exclaimed Lefty Wister, his thin face puckered puzzledly.

"It's supposed to be telepathy, I guess," said Sloan, jeering. "The same as he claimed to use with that eagle."

Shan Kar heard and got up and came toward them. He looked at them with a flash of impatience.

"You still don't believe? In spite of your powerful weapons you outlanders have things to learn."

He spoke to the younger Humanite leader. "Get thought-crowns for them, Diril."

Diril went out of the room and came back with five of the ancient-looking platinum circlets, each one mounted with two quartz disks.

Shan Kar handed them to Nelson and his comrades. "Put them on. Then you can hear."

Nelson hesitated and Li Kin handled his circlet in obvious nervous fright.

"They won't hurt you," said Shan Kar sardonically. "We of L'Lan need them for talk like this. Our minds and the beasts' can converse easily.

"But at a distance these thought-crowns our forefathers made let us hear thought more loudly. They should enable your minds to hear."

They put on the platinum crowns, looking

oddly like hard-faced saints in haloes.

"Well, can you hear now?" asked Shan Kar.

Eric Nelson was startled by realization that Shan Kar's lips had not moved, that he had not *spoken* that question.

"Blimy, it works!" whispered Lefty Wister, with awe. "You can hear the blighter think!"

"Only when the thought is projected by an effort of will," the Humanite assured. "You can't pick up a man's inner mental reverie."

"These crowns must be amplifiers—telepathic amplifiers," Nelson muttered. "The scientists say telepathy is a transmission of electric thought-waves and I suppose the right instrument could set up the power. But how did these people get such instruments?"

"The things are platinum!" said Nick Sloan avidly in English. "The first platinum we've seen here. Try to find out where they keep the stuff, Nelson!"

That Shan Kar heard Sloan's *thought* was proved by his quick answer. "We shall talk later of the metal you want. Now I want you to speak to Tark."

THE great geen eyes of the wolf had a cold flare in them as they steadily met Nelson's gaze. Here was no blind brute fury, but unmistakable intelligence, poise and hatred.

Yet this was a wolf. The white fangs behind those half-drawn lips had almost had his throat out that night in Yen Shi. The great body, crouched on the chain, was the hairy body of a wild beast.

"Tell him," said Shan Kar to Nelson, "how many guns you've brought. He knows their power. He saw them in action in the outworld."

Again, it took Nelson a moment to realize that Shan Kar had spoken telepathically and not vocally.

The green wolf-eyes flashed from Nelson to Shan Kar, and back again. Then Nelson heard the oddly-fibred, oddly-husky mental voice of Tark, as he had heard it in sleep that first night weeks ago.

"I am your prisoner," was the wolf's thought. "You're going to kill me. Why try to impress me now?"

"Because," Shan Kar answered quickly, "we may not kill you, Tark."

"Mercy from a Humanite?" jeered Tark. "Ice from the sun, warmth from the snow, good hunting from the storm!"

Nelson's skin crawled, with an uncanny feeling that matched the horror in Li Kin's gasping exclamation behind him. The wolf was speaking, was jeering, even though those mighty jaws did not part. Brain speaking to brain, wolf brain to human brain, without need of the medium of vocal sound!

"We have you *and* Kree's son," Shan Kar reminded. "But you both might live. We could make a bargain, Tark."

"A bargain?" cried Tark's thought. "Such a bargain as you've offered these ignorant outlanders, promising them pay you can't give?"

"What's that?" cried Sloan, aloud. The man instantly forgot the incredulous amazement that had held him speechless till now and spoke directly to the wolf. "What do you mean he can't pay us?"

"Keep silent!" flared Shan Kar to the animal. "Holk, have the guard take Tark out!"

"Just a minute," said Eric Nelson sharply. "What he says concerns us. I intend to know what he means."

A soundless burst of snarling lupine mirth broke upon Nelson's mind. Tark's green eyes flared with pure pleasure.

"You overreached yourself when you had them put the thought-crowns on, Shan Kar!" he taunted. "You forgot that then *I* could hear their meaning too—and overhear that you'd promised them the gray metal!"

Shan Kar's hand gripped the hilt of his sword as he rose and glared in rage at the wolf.

Nelson, all thought of the scene's strangeness swept away by sudden suspicion, spoke directly to Tark.

"You mean—there is no gray metal here?"

Tark's eyes flickered. "There is gray metal here. But it is all in one place where you can't reach it—the Cavern of Creation."

"What's that?" demanded Nick Sloan, eyes narrowed.

"It is a forbidden place of our Brotherhood," Tark answered. "It is the place whence intelligent life first issued onto the face of Earth, long ago. And it lies at the northern end of the valley L'Lan."

Eric Nelson instantly caught at the salient point in the answer. "At the *northern* end of the valley? Then it's beyond Vruun?"

The wolf's thought answered like a snap of jaws. "It is. Which means you can't reach it!"

CHAPTER VI

Daring Plan

NICK SLOAN, his eyes flaring with suspicion, swung around on Shan Kar. "Is that true?"

Shan Kar shrugged. "It's true that the platinum is all at the north end of L'Lan."

"You said you had platinum here, and would give us all we wanted for our help!" accused Sloan harshly.

"I said there was plenty of it in L'Lan and there is," retorted the Humanite. "But you can't get near it until the Brotherhood is conquered. When we win you'll get your pay."

"A nice neat little double-cross," raged Sloan.

"Only in case *you* planned to deceive *us*," answered Shan Kar pointedly.

Eric Nelson realized the other's cleverness. Shan Kar, obviously mistrusting their motives, had a foolproof defense. They had to win his fight before they could even reach the platinum reward.

Nelson spoke curtly. "Take it easy, Sloan. If the stuff is here we can get it after the job is done."

The oddly husky thought of the wolf Tark interrupted, startling them. The wolf had crouched, listening intently.

"You're still being deceived, outlanders! Not only the clans of the Brotherhood bar the way to the Cavern of Creation. Inside it is the terrible barrier of the cold fire, which you can never pass!"

"Cold fire? What does he mean by that?" Nelson demanded.

"Do not listen to Tark!" Shan Kar flashed. He swung toward the warrior-guards. "Take the Hairy One back to his prison!"

Deftly one of the warriors looped another chain around Tark's throat. Then, with swords drawn, they led him out of the hall. The wolf went quietly but with a backward glance of blazing green eyes.

"It's time for a showdown," Eric Nelson said sharply to Shan Kar. "We've got to have facts if we're to fight for you."

"You shall have them," Shan Kar answered coolly. "But you have been so incredulous that I had to prove to you first that the higher animals of this valley are intelligent races. You'll grant that now?"

Nelson reluctantly nodded. "There doesn't seem much doubt of that any more."

"But how *can* they be intelligent?" Nick Sloan demanded. "It just doesn't make sense."

Shan Kar motioned them to the massive chairs around the table. Holk and the other two Humanite leaders also sat but Shan Kar himself remained standing as he talked.

"Legend is all we have of the remote past here in L'Lan. Legend says that the ancients, our forefathers, were far greater than we, that we lost all their knowledge except for a few relics like the thought-crowns.

"Now we Humanites believe that our forefathers, the ancients, had such knowledge and power that they were able somehow to develop the animals of this valley into intelligent thinking beasts!"

"It does seem the only possible explanation, fantastic as it is," Nelson muttered.

"However it was done," Shan Kar went on, "the fact remains that in this valley the four higher beast-races, the wolf and tiger and horse and eagle, are in some ways the mental equals of man. And those four clans claim their intelligence entitles them to absolute equality with the human race.

"In fact, they even claim that their races and the human race were *created* equal in intelligence, that in the dawn of time they issued equally from the Cavern of Creation!"

Nick Sloan said sharply, "This Cavern of Creation is where the platinum is?"

Shan Kar nodded somberly. "It's in the extreme north end of the valley. We know it contains metal relics left by the ancients. But it's difficult to enter because of certain strange dangers. Only the hereditary Guardian of the Brotherhood knows how to enter it safely.

"All the past Guardians, like Kree, the present one, have woven myth around that cavern. They've claimed that in it, long ago, both the human and the higher beast-races were created equal. And they've claimed to be warders of terrible powers left there by the ancients.

The Humanite went on broodingly, his

face dark with rankling memory.

"They've kept that myth of the primal Brotherhood of man and beast alive here for ages. But in time we learned that it is not so in the outer world, that there man rightfully rules the animals.

"So we tried to claim for us humans the rightful dominant position here too. We didn't want to tyrannize the intelligent beasts. But we did believe that the governing authority should be in human hands.

"A third of the people joined us. But the other two-thirds, besotted by the old myths, adhered to the Brotherhood. Finally we Humanites seceded from the Brotherhood and seized this city, Anshan. *Here* man and beast are not equal as they are in Vruun!"

Eric Nelson felt the shock of astonishment from the picture of L'Lan that had just been unfolded to them.

A HIDDEN valley guarding the relics of a once-mighty civilization, a valley in which beast-races claimed equality with man and in which a human minority was trying to right that!

"It seems incredible," he said, frowning, "that men and women would concede animals, even intelligent animals, equality!"

"Of course it seems so to you of the normal outer world!" Shan Kar exclaimed. "But the people here who follow Kree and the Brotherhood persist in blind belief in the lying legends."

All the passion of the man flamed into his eyes and voice as he continued with fanatic intensity.

"The equality of the Brotherhood is a mere sham that won't endure. As the beast-races learn more they'll aspire to *rule* man here! And some victorious beast-clan will, unless we prevent it.

"That's why we Humanites seceded from the Brotherhood and have brought the threat of civil war to L'Lan! That's why, since we're so badly outnumbered, I went into the outer world for weapons and fighters who could restore the balance of power for us!"

Nelson felt a strong sympathy with Shan Kar's burning passion. There was something repellent in the possibility he depicted. Beast-races demanding equality with men, aspiring to dominance over men! All his instincts rebelled against the idea.

"It gives me the creeps!" muttered Lefty Wister. "You ought to kill all the brutes."

Shan Kar looked a little shocked at that. "We don't want to *destroy* the beast-clans. It's simply that they must learn the Brotherhood is a myth, that men are best fitted to govern."

Nick Sloan's hard, practical mind swung them back to immediate problems. "We still don't know the strategic set-up in this valley," he rapped. "How much of the valley do you Humanites hold?"

Holk rumbled answer. "Only the southern quarter of the valley, including this city Anshan and a few smaller places."

Shan Kar added, "Vruun is the great metropolis of the Brotherhood, humans and beast-clans alike. So far there's been armed truce between them and us Humanites. But the fight last night means war!

"Kree must have suspected my purpose in going to the outer world, and sent his daughter Nsharra with Tark and Hatha and Ei to block me. They failed and the Brotherhood failed again last night. But our capture of Tark and Kree's son begins open conflict now."

Eric Nelson asked quick questions. The answers of the Humanite leaders gave him a discouraging picture. The Humanites, with their fanatic desire to establish human authority, were a minority in the valley. They could not put more than two thousand warriors into the field.

"The Brotherhood has twice that many men and five times that many intelligent beasts of the clans," Shan Kar admitted.

"Pretty stiff odds—but we hold a joker in our machine-guns and grenades," said Nick Sloan.

Nelson nodded. "If there are only swords and bows and spears and the claws and fangs of the brutes against us we should be able to discount the advantage of numbers."

He continued decisively. "We ought to hit them with everything we've got before they get used to our new weapons—smash hard at the heart of this Brotherhood, at Vruun."

Sloan voiced agreement. But the big warrior Holk shook his head doubtfully.

"Our warriors might not follow you to a direct attack on Vruun. They're still afraid of Kree."

"For heaven's sake, why?" demanded Nick Sloan disgustedly.

Shan Kar explained. "The Guardian of the Brotherhood, as I told you, is reputed to be warder of terrible powers left by the ancients in the Cavern of Creation. That's

mostly myth put out by the Guardians during the ages, of course!"

The Humanite paused. "Yet the Guardian does have a few queer powers. He's known to have effected some terrible *transformations*, to punish those who transgressed the Brotherhood. That's left such a memory of horror in L'Lan that even our own fervent followers might hesitate to attack Kree's city directly."

Nelson exploded. "How can we lead a campaign for you when your own people are poisoned by superstition?"

"Let's pull out of this creepy place and go on to Tibet," snarled the Cockney.

"Take it easy, you two!" said Nick Sloan. "With a fortune here for the taking, we're not letting a few difficulties rob us of it."

Shan Kar interrupted. "There's one quick way to overcome that difficulty and that's to capture Kree and Nsharra! That would dismay the Brotherhood and remove our own people's lingering doubts."

"Capture them?" asked Van Voss, his colorless, expressionless eyes on the Humanite. "Why not just kill them?"

"That's out!" snapped Nelson. "We're not murderers."

"And killing them would so infuriate the Brotherhood that they'd never surrender," added Shan Kar.

SLOAN nodded. "Besides, you said the old Guardian and his daughter know the safe way into that cavern where the platinum is. No, we don't want to kill them."

Shan Kar continued rapidly, "A few of us, only a handful, could penetrate Vruun secretly by night and seize Kree and Nsharra. We could make Tark himself lead us secretly and safely into the city!"

"You mean that the wolf will do that if we threaten to kill him?" Li Kin asked, his spectacled eyes wondering.

Shan Kar laughed mirthlessly. "The Hairy One isn't afraid of death. But he doesn't want us to kill Barin, the Guardian's son.

"We'll offer him Barin's life if he guides us into Vruun, supposedly to liberate a Humanite prisoner. Tark may accept."

"It sounds to me like a cursedly complicated and dangerous plan," Sloan commented bluntly.

"But if it succeeded, it would clear the way for a quick blitz against the whole Brotherhood," Nelson said thoughtfully. "I'll lead the attempt if the wolf can be talked into guiding us."

"Have the guards bring Tark back in," Shan Kar told Diril.

The great wolf stalked back into the black hall, his chains held carefully taut by the sword-armed guards who walked on either side of him.

Tark swept them with his gaze. Erie Nelson felt a chill, uncanny shock in meeting those eyes that were like pools of cold green fire.

Shan Kar and the Humanites apparently found nothing strange in the scene. They were too accustomed to contact and speech with the intelligent beasts of the Brotherhood.

"You must choose now whether young Barin is to live or die," Shan Kar told Tark.

His lips did not move, Nelson saw. He was *thinking* to the wolf again and Nelson and his companions were picking up that thought through their thought-crowns. Tark's lips writhed back from great white fangs in a soundless snarl. His answering thought came fiercely.

"A trick! You want nothing more than to kill both Barin and myself!"

"That is quite true," Shan Kar coolly agreed. "But even more than to kill you two we want something else."

His thought raced on. "Holk's brother, Jhanon, is a prisoner in Vruun, as you know. We wish to rescue him. We'll give yours and Barin's lives for his freedom."

"*I* have not authority to release Jhanon," Tark retorted. "Only the Guardian can do that."

"But you *could* guide a few of us secretly into Vruun, so we could release Jhanon ourselves," pressed Shan Kar. "Do so, and Barin goes free."

Tark's thought came after a pause. "If I did that it would be a direct disobedience of the Guardian's orders."

"But if you don't, the Guardian's son will die!" Shan Kar threatened. "Nsharra sent you to watch over her brother, didn't she? And you failed, Tark! How will you face her and report your failure?"

Tark's green eyes narrowed. The wolf looked from one to the other of them, then back to Shan Kar.

"You are right," his telepathic answer came finally. "I will be committing a minor act of treachery against the Brotherhood,

but I must do it to prevent a worse thing happening."

"Then this very night we go to Vruun!" Shan Kar said swiftly. He pointed to Nelson. "He and one of his comrades go with us, Tark."

Tark's eyes flickered back to Nelson's face, and the green orbs were inscrutable in expression.

"That is well," he answered. "I promise to get you secretly and safely into Vruun."

When the guards had taken the great wolf away Nelson expressed his satisfaction.

"So far, so good! With the wolf guiding us, we've a strong chance of getting hold of Kree and the girl."

Shan Kar looked at him with an ironical smile. "You still underestimate Tark's resolution and cunning. He *knows* that it's Kree and Nsharra we're really going after. He figures to lead us inside Vruun and then suddenly turn on us and give the alarm."

"Then why are you going in there with him, if you think that?" exclaimed Sloan.

Shan Kar's smile hardened. "Because, if all goes well, we'll outguess Tark. Once inside Vruun, we'll overpower *him* before he can betray us!"

CHAPTER VII

Secret Mission

NIGHT brooded over Anshan, a velvety darkness that enwrapped the city's glassy towers and domes. Like glimmering ghost-bubbles the fairy spherical structures caught and imaged the thousand stars that burned in the blue-black sky.

Nelson turned from the open window out which he had been gazing and looked across the torchlit room at the others.

"The moon won't be up for hours and that's good. With luck we can get in and out of Vruun before it rises."

"I wish that you were not going," murmured Li Kin, his bespectacled face troubled.

Lefty Wister had elected to accompany Nelson. He sat checking the service automatics which Nelson had deemed more suitable than submachine-guns for this stealthy attempt. Van Voss sat watching with his pale, expressionless eyes.

Nelson shrugged. "It's risky but no more so than some of the things we pulled for old Yu Chi Chan. And if we can capture Kree and his daughter we have a chance to clean up this business pronto."

Nick Sloan nodded agreement. "But you watch yourself, Nelson. That cursed thinking wolf will have your heart out if he gets the jump on you."

"I want to be the one to kill that brute whenever the times comes!" Lefty said venomously.

The little Cockney had chosen to be the one to accompany Nelson despite the fact that of them all he had the most superstitious horror of the intelligent animals. It was almost as though he was drawn on the dangerous mission by a fascination of hate.

Shan Kar and young Diril entered the room in full warrior dress of helmet, breastplate and sword-belt.

The Humanite's olive face was flushed with excitement, his black eyes eager. He held two of the thought-crowns in his hand.

"You're ready?" he said to Nelson. "Then we'll get Tark. But first put on the thought-crowns—you two must wear them constantly."

They went out and down the torchlit corridors with him, Li Kin looking mournfully after them from the doorway. Shan Kar led them through the vaulted ways of the building to a torchlit passage that had sentries posted in it. The doors here had massive wooden bars, set in crude, heavy metal hooks. This row of rooms had been converted thus into a prison-wing.

Eric Nelson was struck again by the contrast between the primitive ways of the present inhabitants of L'Lan and the marvelous, alien beauty and splendor of the ancient cities they inhabited. Truly these people had lost the knoweldge of their ancient forebears!

Shan Kar unbarred and opened a door. The great wolf Tark rose soundlessly inside, and looked at them with inscrutable green eyes. Again, Nelson had the eery experience of *hearing* the wolf's projected thought through the instrument of ancient science that he wore upon his head.

"Before I go, I must see Barin," came Tark's thought.

"No!" said Shan Kar instantly.

"Then I do not go!" flashed the wolf. "For how am I to know but what you've killed him already?"

Shan Kar hesitated. "Very well. You

can see him. But you're not to plot with him, Tark!"

The wolf trotted soundlessly beside them as they went down the corridor to the farthest barred door. Nelson noticed that Lefty Wister never took his eyes off the beast. The Cockney's pinched face glared his fear and hatred.

Barin leaped up from his wooden cot when Shan Kar opened the door. The youth still had a raw wound in his forehead, but seemed to have otherwise recovered.

Nelson saw his likeness to Nsharra—the same high-bred, handsome features, the same intense passion flashing in his dark eyes.

"Betrayer of the Brotherhood!" Barin spat at Shan Kar. "Blasphemer against the law!"

He struck fire from Shan Kar. The latter's deep fanatic intensity of purpose boiled instantly to the surface.

"Your father's law—law of the lying Guardians of all the ages, who have told our people that beasts should rank with men!"

The wolf Tark was gazing fixedly at Barin and Nelson heard his thought. "Barin, if all goes well, you will soon be free. Wait quietly."

Barin glanced swiftly at the wolf, then suspiciously at Nelson and the Cockney.

"You plan something with these outlanders? Tark, I will not—"

"Wait quietly!" repeated the wolf, harshly commanding.

"No more!" cut in Shan Kar.. The Humanite brusquely pushed them back, closed and barred the door.

It seemed to Eric Nelson that some swift glance of understanding had passed between Barin and Tark. A secret signal? Yet Tark went quietly enough with them back through the corridors. They emerged into the darkness of a court where warriors waited with a half-dozen horses.

"We take two extra horses for remounts," Shan Kar said.

The wolf ventured no comment. But Nelson wondered if he guessed that the extra mounts were intended for Kree and Nsharra.

THE next instant it was swept from his mind by a disturbing shock. The horses tossed their heads excitedly against their cruel-bitted bridles and uttered eager thoughts that sounded in Nelson's brain.

"It's the Hairy One!" they cried. "Tark!"

It shook Nelson. And Lefty uttered a smothered oath.

"These horses of yours are *talking* to the bloody wolf!" cried the Cockney to Shan Kar.

Shan Kar answered curtly. "All the clans in this valley are intelligent. These Hoofed Ones are our prisoners of war."

"Slaves, say rather!" flashed the passionate thought of the golden mare in the forefront. "Slaves, beaten into beasts of burden by the Humanites! Tark, do they know this in Vruun?"

The thought of the wolf came pregnant with hate and menace. "We knew many of Hatha's clan were captured, but did not know the Humanites dared enslave you thus, brothers!"

A bay stallion, ears flattened and eyes rolling, reared up despite the saw-edged bit that cut his mouth.

"Tark, have you come to free us? By the Cavern, speak but a word and we fight and die here now!"

"My warriors can kill you all swiftly—and then Barin dies!" Shan Kar warned the wolf.

"Wait, brothers!" the wolf's thought ordered the rearing, excited horses. "Wait and go quietly with us now—it is for the good of the Brotherhood."

Unearthly, that thought-colloquy of wolf and horses, to Eric Nelson! He was surely deluding himself, he thought—his mind could not actually be hearing that swift interchange of passionate thought—

But the rearing horses quieted, and from them came quick answer. "We obey, Tark! If it is for the Brotherhood!"

Shan Kar spoke to Nelson and the Cockney. "Mount now—and fear nothing. These Hoofed Ones have learned their masters!"

It gave Nelson a creepy feeling to swing into the rude saddle of the golden mare and to realize that his mount was intelligently aware of him, hating him, wanting to kill him.

They rode out of the court and on out through the dark silent windings of forest that enlaced Anshan. Tark ran silently, a black shadow, beside Shan Kar's steed.

Then they were out on the rolling plain, under a sky of magnificent stars against whose sparkling splendor the lofty peaks around L'Lan towered solemn and distant!

"Now lead the way, Tark, and remember

that if you lead us wrongly Barin dies!"

The great wolf noiselessly slid ahead of their little mounted party. He trotted almost due north across the plain.

"Keep close behind me," his thought came back. "Obey instantly when I direct you."

Wind, cold from the distant peaks, buffeted Eric Nelson's face as the mare loped steadily. Lefty Wister bucketed along just behind, Diril bringing up the rear with the two spare horses.

The wolf veered constantly to keep always as near as possible to the clumps of trees that dotted the plain. Soon Nelson learned the reason.

Tark whirled, just ahead of them, and his eyes flashed green light as his sharp thought came back to them.

"Into the trees! Quickly!"

There was a clump of birch close ahead. They spurred into the little grove. There Shan Kar turned in his saddle toward the wolf, his thought suspicious and menacing.

"Is this a trick? If it is, Tark—"

"Quiet!" commanded the wolf. "Scouts are coming."

They came as three gliding shadows up against the stars. Nelson saw they were eagles winging high in the darkness, soundless as flying clouds, sweeping on toward Anshan.

"Now we can go on," the wolf told them a minute later. "The Winged Ones have passed."

"What are they doing here?" Shan Kar asked harshly.

"Going to watch Anshan," was the curt answer of Tark.

They rode on, veering to keep near the infrequent tree-clumps, until the solid wall of the forest loomed up before them.

The forest was like a dark maw gaping for them. The thought of the intelligent, hostile beasts that roamed its ways made it seem a black witch-wood to Nelson. He didn't want to go into it.

Neither did Lefty Wister. The Cockney's voice snarled in the dimness beside Nelson. "If that blasted wolf has got others waiting for us in there—"

It seemed pitch-dark beneath the trees at first. Then Nelson's eyes became more accustomed to the deeper obscurity. He looked up and saw tall trunks and graceful boughs against the stars, recognized the outlines of larch and cedar and fir.

The forest smelled dry. The rainless months had parched it so that each twig the horses stepped on snapped and broke. Tark was a darker shadow in the darkness, leading the way between the trees by occasional back-glances of luminous green eyes.

"Why don't we follow the river to Vruun?" Shan Kar demanded. "It would be the clearest way."

"To discovery," Tark's thought retorted harshly. "Quorr's clan are the greatest danger. The Clawed Ones roam those river-brakes by night."

CLAWED Ones? He meant the tigers, Nelson realized. His skin crawled at the thought of meeting those striped killers here.

"No more thought-speech unless I speak first!" Tark continued peremptorily. "Your danger deepens with each mile we traverse now."

The horses were jumpy as they went on through the forest, up ridges, through brushy valleys. The mare quivered under Nelson.

Excitement? He wondered. They must know they were going toward Vruun. Was that why they were so jumpy? It made Nelson feel a sudden pity for them. These were not the dumb beasts of the outer world. These horses were intelligent as men. And to be captured, enslaved, broken from their complete freedom into beasts of burden—

He thrust such thoughts impatiently from his mind. He was letting the influences of this fantastic valley affect him. Animals were animals, no matter if they could speak telepathically and think—

They had been traveling for more than an hour when a yapping wolf-call from west of them was answered by a low coughing roar from the direction of the river. Tark stopped and came back to them. The wolf's eyes glared up at them.

"We must leave the Hoofed Ones here. We can't trust them not to betray us if we pass others of the Clans."

Instantly from the horses came thoughts of passionate protest. "Tark, we thought you took us to Vruun! Are you not going to free us?"

"Brothers, I cannot!" was the wolf's answer. "For the good of the Brotherhood you must remain captive a while longer."

A moment of silence followed and then Eric Nelson heard the slow thought of their

reply. "We trust you, Tark. We will obey."

Nelson dismounted. Shan Kar was speaking swiftly to young Diril.

"You'll wait here with the Hoofed Ones. Slit their throats if they try to send a single thought out."

"They will not!" the wolf flared. "Now follow me and move as silently as you can."

They were at the crest of a wooded ridge. The wolf led northward along this crest, pausing often to sniff the wind. Again, they heard wolf-cries from the west but there was no answer this time. Suddenly Tark whirled, his thought urgent.

"One of the Clawed Ones comes this way! Lie still and I will try to turn him back before he winds you!"

Nelson followed Shan Kar's example and crouched in high ferns. He pulled Lefty down after him as the bewildered Cockney drew his gun. Tark bounded ahead. Nelson glimpsed him stopping in a little patch of starlight between two dead trees ahead.

Tark uttered a low, barking call, looking toward the east. Instantly a coughing grunt answered. A minute later, a big striped beast glided into the patch of starlight—a tiger whose size dwarfed Tark. Nelson's mind clearly caught the swift interchange of thought between the two nearby beasts.

"Tark! Tark of the Hairy Ones, free in the forests! All the Clans have thought you dead or prisoner in Anshan!"

"I escaped, Grih! But Barin is still prisoner in Anshan."

"Not for long, Hairy One! The Guardian gathers the Clans! Word has flown through all the valley that war with the Humanites begins!"

The wolf's thoughts raced. "Grih, you can help me! Hasten you to the forest-edge above Anshan and watch if the Humanites trail me!"

Fiercely throbbed the striped beast's answer. "I go at once! If they come I shall send word by Ei's folk! Speed you to Vruun, brother!"

Nelson saw the tiger whirl and melt away in the dark forest, heading southeastward down the wooded slope. He lowered the gun he'd kept leveled as Tark came loping back to them. "There can be no delay now! We must hurry!"

"So Kree gathers the Clans for war?" Shan Kar said fiercely. "So be it! They shall learn their masters when they come against men!"

The wolf made no answer but his eyes flared brilliantly as he turned to lead on.

Nelson, aware of the vital necessity of keeping the way back to the horses clearly in mind, estimated they went nearly a mile more along the forested ridge before Tark stopped. The wolf led them down the slope from the ridge a little. Here was a fire-scarred break in the trees that gave vision downward.

"Vruun!" exclaimed Shan Kar in a taut whisper.

Nelson, startled, perceived in his first glimpse that, in the level forest down below this ridge, there sprawled the big river. And beside the river, on their side of it, glimmered the lights and buildings of the city of the Brotherhood.

"Blimy!" choked Lefty Wister. "Look at that place!"

Nelson realized that he was looking upon a city whose strangeness had no counterpart on Earth.

CHAPTER VIII

Weird City

IMMEASURABLY ancient and alien looked Vruun, its glassy bubble-domes and towers brooding beneath the stars. Torchlight spilled from open doors and windows to illuminate vaguely its streets and enlacing forest-ways.

For Vruun, like Anshan, was a city into which the forest came. It was like a Venice, with winding ways of woods instead of canals—woods that were woven into the very texture of the city.

Eric Nelson, crouching with Shan Kar and the Cockney and the great wolf above the city, felt a cold shock of incredulity as he glimpsed the figures that came and went past lighted doorways down there. For those figures were not all human.

He had anticipated that. But anticipation had not tempered the shock of actually *seeing* it.

"It's a devil's city!" husked Lefty Wister. The little Cockney was shivering. "Look at those animals!"

"Now you understand why we Humanites rebelled and seceded from Vruun!" came

Shan Kar's throbbing whisper.

Men and beasts came and went together across those torchlit doorways below. Men and women in silk or warrior dress. And beasts of the Brotherhood, mingling with the humans, jostling them.

Nelson glimpsed a little pack of gray wolves trotting into the city from the south. He saw two great tigers moving out of it that way. And across a shallow ford a half-dozen wild-maned horses came splashing over the river to Vruun.

Men and beasts of the Brotherhood—meeting and mingling in fantastic fraternity in this ancient, alien city! Wings swept across the sky and he saw great eagles gliding down toward the openings high in the glassy towers. He realized then that those towers had been built as eyries for the Winged Ones, that all Vruun, like Anshan, had been *built* to house this incredible fraternal mingling of species!

"There are too many abroad in Vruun—too many for this late!" Shan Kar was muttering.

"The coming of war has stirred all the Clans," came Tark's answering thought.

The wolf continued quickly. "Jhanon, the prisoner you seek to free, is held in the Hall of the Clans. But the Guardian and the Clan-leaders undoubtedly hold council there tonight."

Nelson glimpsed the distant building at which the wolf was gazing, an enormous pale bubble-structure, shimmering vaguely in the starlight near the center of the forest city.

"You've got to get us into the hall, so that we may liberate Jhanon," Shan Kar quickly told the wolf.

Nelson realized that everything was working their way. The fact of the Humanite prisoner being in that building made it possible to let Tark lead them right in there before they turned on him. Yet he had a dim suspicion that this fortunate coincidence was *too* fortunate! If Tark had really fathomed that their mission was to seize Kree and Nsharra—

The wolf's clear thought interrupted his uneasy speculations. "There's only one secret way to the Hall and that's by the drains of the ancients."

"We could too easily lose ourselves in that maze of tunnels," objected Shan Kar.

"Not if *I* guide you," Tark assured. "But the decision is yours. You can see there is no other way for you to enter Vruun."

Nelson liked the prospect less and less. But it was obviously madness for them to try entering the city openly. Unless they took the wolf's way in they must give up the whole attempt.

He said as much to Shan Kar. "We'll try it. Lefty, you can wait here if you want to."

"I'm goin'," whispered the Cockney hoarsely.

"We will swing around to enter Vruun from the north side," Tark said. "Few of the Brotherhood ever go out that way from the city."

"Why not?" Nelson demanded suspiciously.

Shan Kar answered, pointing. "The Cavern of Creation, the forbidden place, lies up there."

Nelson stared with swift interest. He saw that, north of Vruun, the level forests that encompassed the city marched up to grassy hills that were the foothills of the great northern mountains. In the face of those dark hills he glimpsed a great cavernous opening. He could see it in the dark because light came from it—a vague, unreal, quivering white glow.

The light danced and wavered, throbbing like a heart. Witch-light, ghost-light, pulsing mysteriously from that great opening!

"Yes, that is the Cavern," Shan Kar answered his thought. "The glow is of the cold fire that forbids entrance to all except the few who know the secret way."

Cold fire? Nelson felt a sharp wonder. There must be something deadly there to have inspired such awe and fear. But what?

SHAN KAR said savagely, "The Cavern is a curse to L'Lan! That unholy place started the Brotherhood's lying myth that our human and beast races were there created equal."

They lost sight of that mysterious distant eye of light as they followed Tark down the forest slope. The wolf led them into the gully of a small stream-bed that ran past the north side of Vruun toward the river.

The stream-bed was empty in this dry season, its sands baked flat and hard. Its high banks hid the city from them as they approached. The wolf finally stopped and they heard his urgent thought-command. "This way—and quickly!"

They blundered after him toward a dark, mouth-like opening in the southern bank of

the little gully. Tark led into the opening and Shan Kar, sword in hand, followed. Nelson and the Cockney gripped their pistols as they too stooped and went in.

They found themselves in absolute darkness. Nelson flashed his pocket-light, startling both Tark and Shan Kar.

"What is this place?" Nelson demanded.

It was a round tunnel of glassy substance. They could not have kept footing in it but for the dried sand and silt on its floor.

"These drains carry the waters from the ridges in the rainy season down beneath the city to the river," explained Shan Kar. "No man knows all their labyrinth."

"No man, but we of the Clans know," put in Tark. "I can lead you to an opening directly beneath the Hall."

Shan Kar surreptitiously pressed Nelson's wrist. It was the signal they had agreed upon and he knew what it meant. They were to stun the wolf as soon as he led them beneath the Hall of Clans. Then, swiftly and secretly, they must seize Kree and Nsharra and return.

Nsharra? Nelson felt an odd quickening of his pulse each time he thought of the witch-girl who had nearly had his life once. He hated that irrational throb of excitement.

"Still romantic," he told himself satirically. "Even ten years of China hasn't ground all that out of you."

Shan Kar was telling Tark, "Lead the way. But, Tark, remember that if you try to go too fast you will die very quickly."

The wolf made no reply but trotted deliberately forward up the gently slanting tunnel. The three men, stooping, followed. Soon, the tunnel forked. Tark unhesitatingly took the left turn. They followed, their pistols and the light covering him.

The tense silent progress into these ramifying tubeways beneath Vruun began to get on Eric Nelson's nerves. He began to think he could hear a whispering echo of sound from behind them.

He told himself, as he glanced swiftly backward, that he was letting his nerve slip, that he—

He *did* glimpse something back there in the tunnel! Blazing eyes in the gloom, eyes that were following them!

"It's a trap! We're being followed—" Nelson started to yell.

But the wolf caught his thought and acted even as the sound left his lips. Tark whirled and charged back on them with inconceivable swiftness. His hairy body was a living battering-ram that knocked the little light from Nelson's hand. The wolf crashed on through them.

"Knew it!" shrilled Lefty Wister, and triggered his automatic half-blindly as the light smashed out against the floor.

The thunderous echoes of the forty-five were deafening in the confined tunnel and Nelson heard ricochets screaming. Then Tark, who had crashed back through them to join those other eyes following them, sent his thought through the dark to them.

"We block your way to liberty! You cannot escape—lay down your weapons!"

"A trick!" raged Shan Kar. "Tark somehow managed to betray us without our knowing."

"As you planned to betray *me* with your lie of coming for Jhanon!" rang the wolf's thought from the darkness. "Fools, not to know that when Grih went toward Anshan at my order, he'd strike our trail and backtrail it—follow us to Vruun!" [*Turn page*]

Nelson, in a flash, realized the wolf's cunning in sending that Clawed One they had met in the forest on a direction tbat would cross their trail and thus tell the tiger something was wrong.

"Lay down your weapons and we shall not kill!" Tark's thought continued swiftly. "You shall be our hostages for Barin!"

FOR answer, Lefty Wister mouthed a curse and emptied his gun into the darkness. But again the slugs ricocheted in whining shrieks off the curved walls of the tunnel.

"They're back around the fork where your weapons can't reach them!" Shan Kar cried. "They'll arouse all Vruun! No chance now to seize the Guardian. We must escape this trap!"

Nelson, scrambling back to the fork in the tunnel, had hastily pulled a bulbous object from his pocket. He ripped out its pin.

"This will clear the way out for us!" he rasped and leaned and hurled the deadly thing around the fork of the tunnel.

"Down!" he yelled, and at the same instant heard the swift warning thought of Tark.

"An outland weapon, Grih! Out of the tunnel, quick!"

Nelson had a second to remember that Tark had seen grenades in action in Yen Shi before his own grenade exploded.

The explosion in the confined tunnel felt titanic. A giant scorching hand smashed them down flatter against the silted floor. Nelson leaped up, still dazed and shaky from the explosion, and shouted to the others. "Now—back out of here!"

They scrambled down through the tunnel, over broken shards of glass masonry the grenade had ripped from its wall. Now a dim circle of starlight ahead showed their exit.

They burst out of it into the starlit gully of the little dry stream, and tripped over a huge, striped, prostrate body. The tiger, Grih, had not escaped the tunnel quite in time and the outblast of the grenade had stunned or killed him.

"I hope it got that cursed wolf too!" raged Lefty. "I should have killed him when I wanted to first!"

Nelson, at that moment, heard a wolf-howl from nearby, and realized that Tark had escaped the hlast in time.

"He rouses the city!" Shan Kar cried furiously. "But Barin shall pay the penalty for his trick! If we can reach our horses—"

They scrambled furiously up the gully of the dry streambed to the forested ridge. Nelson, gasping, turned and looked back. Out of torchlit Vruun, four-footed shapes were racing swiftly on their track. A terrific wolf-cry echoed up from that band of racing creatures, a heart-stopping sound.

Nelson seemed to himself, in the next minutes, to be watching from another dimension as the three of them fled through the forest along the ridge. He was two men, and one of them was watching like a disembodied *ka* of himself while the other self expended every ounce of energy in flight.

"We're near the horses!" Shan Kar encouraged. "Diril will be waiting with them."

Again, from much closer behind them, came Tark's terrific hunting-cry. Lefty Wister stopped and whirled around, his pinched face a white blur, his voice hoarse and wild.

"I won't be hunted by that brute! I'll kill him!"

He had his gun raised, was crouched, looking back.

"Lefty, keep your head!" cried Nelson, checking in mid-stride to turn back.

"Leave the man or you die with him!" cried Shan Kar from the darkness ahead.

He ought to, Nelson knew. It was sheer folly to try to save the Cockney, whose brain had given way to unreasoning hatred and horror.

He owed no more to Lefty than to the others. Mere fortune of war had thrown him into company of the hard-bitten, crime-stained little band and he had no loyalty due to any of them. But the ingrained tradition of supporting a comrade-in-arms was too much for Nelson.

He turned back, grabbed the Cockney's arm. "Lefty, come—"

It was as far as he got. That brief delay had been enough for those who followed to overtake Lefty and himself. Dark, leaping shadows of wolf and tiger came plunging through the dry brush. Tark's thought-cry leaped ahead of him.

"We will not kill if you—"

Lefty Wister's automatic poured a stream of fire at the vague shadow of the wolf. Nelson saw Tark dodge with unhuman swiftness an instant before the other fired, then saw the wolf at the Cockney's throat.

He heard Lefty's bubbling, horrible

scream as he triggered his own pistol at the dim shapes rushing upon him.

He saw the blazing, awful eyes of a striped beast leaping toward him from the right. An unpraised giant paw eclipsed everything as he tried to swing his gun around in time.

Then Nelson saw nothing.

CHAPTER IX

Judgment of the Guardian

"*THE man stirs, mistress! I told you that he was but stunned.*"

Nelson heard that queer voice inside his mind, as he floated through infinities of aching darkness.

"*Tark, it might be better for him if he had died out there in the forest!*"

It seemed to Nelson that time had doubled back upon itself and that he lay again in the squalid inn in Yen Shi as he had lain that night he had first heard the thought-voices in his dreams.

But the throbbing pain in his head was no dream. He tried to raise his hand toward his temple and discovered by the attempt that his sitting body was bound in a chair.

Fear and memory pounced together upon Nelson's mind. He made a convulsive effort and opened his eyes. Brilliant sunlight from an open window caught his eye first and then the detail of the room focused slowly.

It was a high-ceilinged, long gallery with pale blue glassy walls. The sunight danced and quivered and shimmered off those walls, sunbeams seeming to play around the room.

Nsharra sat in a chair six feet from him, and the great wolf, Tark, crouched like a dog beside her. Both were watching him. Subconsciously, he'd expected it. He'd remembered their disputing thought-voices as he had heard them at Yen Shi. He knew he'd heard them more clearly now because he still wore the thought-crown.

"Yes," said Nsharra quietly. "You are in Vruun, where you wished to come, Eric Nelson."

It was strange to hear his name from her lips and to remember that night in Yen Shi when he had told it to her between kisses. And it was stranger, to Nelson, to see her here sitting in her chair like a gray-eyed young princess in white silk and to realize that this was the sing-song girl of that far-away night.

"Lefty?" he said. He said it without hope and the girl nodded her dark bead slightly.

"Tark was forced to kill bim. It was courageous of you to turn back for him. If you had not you too might have—"

She stopped. But Nelson, every sense sharpened to acuteness by his situation, seized on the unfinished sentence.

"I too might have escaped, you were going to say? Then Shan Kar *did* escape?"

Nsharra said nothing but her lids had half-veiled her eyes for a moment and Nelson knew that he had guessed correctly. For a moment, he wondered what Nick Sloan and Shan Kar would do now. Sloan wouldn't give up the campaign to crush the Brotherhood—not with a fortune in platinum to win.

Then, mentally, Eric Nelson shrugged his shoulders. What difference did it make to him now?

"Are you going to kill me too?" he asked directly.

"Are you afraid of death?" Nsharra countered.

He answered levelly: "I don't want to die. But I think I can manage it if I have to."

Nsharra smiled faintly. "That is an honest answer, Eric Neslon." Then her face sobered swiftly. "But it is not mere death you have to fear."

Tark looked up at the girl. The wolf's thought came clearly to Nelson.

"Mistress, I did what I could with the others of the Council. But your father is grimly resolved and Quorr and Hatha demand vengeance."

"And Ei?" questioned Nsharra's thought.

"Who knows the Winged One's mind?" countered the wolf. "They will all be here soon to judge the man."

Nelson had watched this silent discussion between the girl and wolf in a strange fascination that had undertones of horror. Witch-girl and her familiars! Mistress of *kuei*, Li Kin had called her! Not human, not wholly human—

Nsharra apparently read the thought behind his staring gaze. For a quick flush mantled her olive face.

"*You* are here for judgment, not I, outlander!" she flashed. "Do not look at me so!"

Witch-girl, maybe, but utterly feminine

that reaction, Nelson thought. The door opened suddenly and a man stood in the doorway looking in at them.

Nelson knew at once this was the Guardian of the Brotherhood—Kree, Nsharra's father. He had the stamp of authority on his face. He was old enough to have iron-gray hair but he stood sword-straight in the doorway. He wore a loose black silken tunic and trousers, and over them a long, gold-worked black cloak.

His piercing dark eyes were bent upon Nelson, but it was to Nsharra and Tark he spoke.

"So the outlander has regained bis senses? That is well. The Clan leaders wish to see him."

He came into the room, and a great tiger stalked softly in after him. And with click of hoofs on tbe floor came too the big fire-eyed black stallion whom Nelson remembered also from Yen Shi.

WINGS swished and through the broad open window swept an enormous eagle that perched lightly on the back of Nsharra's big chair.

Clan-leaders of the Brotherhood! Beast-eyes and bird-eyes watching him, *judging* him! Nelson's stomach began to crawl. It wasn't just fear. It was the outer world tradition of man and beast as separate orders of being that put a horror of this unhuman panel of judges into his mind.

Tark rose to his feet and looked at Kree and at the stallion and tiger and eagle.

"Before you judge, brothers, remember that this outlander is the last thread by which we may still draw Barin out of danger!"

Kree looked somberly at the great wolf. "It is your love for my son and daughter that speaks, Tark. These outlanders and their weapons are our greatest peril."

The stallion, Hatha, looked at Nelson with fiery eyes and Nelson heard his savage thought.

"This man should die. He seeks to help Shan Kar made L'Lan like his outer world, a place where our races are driven, enslaved brutes."

The raging thought of the great tiger Quorr instantly supported Hatha.

"Blood of our dead calls for vengeance! These outlanders have brought death into our land and must taste death!"

Nsharra's thought interrupted, as she rose from her chair.

"Yet this man sinned in ignorance! He knew nothing of the Brotherhood in all his life till he came to L'Lan."

The great eagle turned his head to the others and Nelson barely caught the swift flash of Ei's thought.

"Nsharra speaks truth. The man may have blundered into killing without realizing his crime."

Nelson was astonished. Why should the Winged One, seemingly farthest of them all from humanity, speak for him?

"Have you grown blind who boast sharpest sight, Ei?" raged the tiger. "Can you not see the deadly danger in these men?"

"Yet we could use him as hostage to free Barin!" Tark reminded them again anxiously. There was a silence in which they all looked at Kree. Nelson realized that, in this Council, the Guardian's decision would carry.

Kree spoke slowly. "We can do both things you wish. We can use this outlander as a hostage for Barin and at the same time we can punish him for what he has done. This man came into L'Lan to help shatter the Brotherhood. There is a penalty that we invoke on those who sin against the Brotherhood."

Nelson did not understand. But his brief flicker of relief vanished as he saw the horror that came into Nsbarra's eyes.

"Let the man die rather than that!" she exclaimed. "He does not merit that penalty since he knew nothing of the Brotherhood!"

"He will learn and he will learn quickly," Kree said grimly.

"The Guardian is right! The punishment of the ancients for the outlander!" cried Quorr, tiger-eyes blazing.

"Tark, it shall be one of your clan," Kree told the wolf. "But that one must volunteer."

"There will be no lack to volunteer for the Brotherhood!" cried the wolf's thought. He raced swiftly out of the room.

Kree went out too. Tiger, eagle and stallion remained, watching Nelson.

Nsharra's face had an aching pity on it as she looked at Nelson. And that pity awakened true fear in him.

"Nsharra, what are they going to do to me?" he asked her.

"It is the penalty of the ancients," she answered. "Long ago, from the Cavern of Creation, a Guardian brought one of their

subtle instruments that he had learned from their records to operate. It has been used rarely to punish those who transgress the Brotherhood."

"But what *is* it?" he asked thickly. "Torture?"

"Not torture nor death," she whispered. "But worse, a—"

She broke off to hasten across the room toward her father. Kree had returned, wheeling a bulky object in front of him. Nelson felt his fear increasing. He remembered what Shan Kar had said—that the Guardian possessed a queer power of the ancients to effect terrible *transformations*. A power that had been used only rarely against transgressors but that had left a memory of horror in all L'Lan.

He stared at the big object Kree had brought. It was an upright man-high platinum box mounted on wheels. The only clues to whatever strange apparatus was inside it were two levers upon its face.

FROM opposite sides of the top of the tall box branched two heavy platinum rods. Each ended in a queerly-grooved quartz disk three feet in diameter. Each of the two big disks was parallel to the floor.

Nsharra was appealing to her father. "He does not even know what you plan, father! He will go mad! Does he merit that?"

"Do the beasts of the outer world merit the slavery and death that this man and his kind deal them?" retorted Kree harshly.

Nelson tried to reassure himself. He tried to tell himself that the queer platinum apparatus could be only a meaningless relic, that this was mere primitive mumbo-jumbo.

He couldn't do it. He couldn't conquer the horror that was tightening across his chest like a steel band.

Tark had come back into the room. And with him was another wolf, a young, rangy dog-wolf, lean of flank and bright of eye, big but dwarfed by the great leader of his Clan.

"This is Asha of my Clan," came Tark's thought. "He offers to be the one."

Kree looked at the young wolf. "You know the danger to you, Asha?"

"I know!" rang the dog-wolf's thought. "It is for the Brotherhood. I am willing."

"Then stand there, close to the outlander's chair," ordered Kree, pointing.

Nelson saw the dog-wolf walk over and stand a few feet from him, where the Guardian had indicated. The wolf looked over at him—strangely. Something in that bright unhuman gaze shook Nelson.

He wouldn't let all this flummery of superstitious rites shake his nerve—he wouldn't!

Kree wheeled the tall platinum machine between Nelson's chair and the young wolf. He adjusted it so that one of its branching quartz disks was over Nelson's head, the other over Asha the wolf.

"Let the ancients witness that I use their power not lightly but for the Brotherhood!" intoned the Guardian.

Superstition, traditional ritual—that was all it was, all it could be. But Nelson's heart had begun pounding hard as he saw the horror grow and grow on Nsharra's pale face.

Kree's hand fell. It thrust down both of the levers on the face of the platinum machine. From the two big quartz disks, white light sprang downward. One beam of blinding brilliance struck and bathed Nelson, the other struck the dog-wolf on the other side of the enigmatic machine.

Light? No, force! For Eric Nelson felt himself rocked by a terrific shock as the brilliant beam struck him. His brain shrieked to a nightmare *rending* sensation. He had a ghastly feeling that he, the real he, was being torn loose from something and dragged through nothingness.

CHAPTER X

Dread Metamorphosis

NELSON felt that he was falling, swooping downward like a meteor into bottomless gulfs. It came to him that he was dead and he wondered where his soul was going and what would happen after it got there.

The abyss rushed by him with a soundless scream as he plunged down and down. And then he struck bottom. It seemed to him that the universe tipped over on him, smothering him in utter darkness.

Presently, very faintly, there was light again and sound—a dim, blurred web of it lacing around him. He was vaguely aware of something and, after a while, he realized that he was breathing.

He was breathing heavily. It had a strange hoarse sound in his ears but it was nice to be breathing again. It meant that he was not dead after all. He lay waiting for the terrible giddiness to leave him, so that he could see again.

But he did not really need to see.

Across the dark confusion of his mind, a pattern began to grow. It was woven of unfamiliar things. Rustlings, scratchings, clickings, the different tempos of breathing—noises that should have been almost subauditory but instead were clear and sharp.

They were the background of the pattern, the warp. The threads of the woof were brighter, stronger. They were—smells.

The rich dark smell of horse, strong gray wolf-taint, the sullen crimson reek of tiger, the bright sharp acridity of a great bird. And man-smell, in itself a tapestry of odors, more subtle and complex than those of the beasts.

Eric Nelson realized with incredulous horror that not only did he know each separate smell but he knew the particular individuality of each. They had names—Hatha, Tark, Quorr, Ei, Kree and Nsharra.

He leaped broad awake then, on a surging shock of fear, and opened his eyes on a world he had never seen before.

It was a world without color. A world of gray shadings, black and white. He could perceive objects clearly but he perceived them on a strange plane. His field of vision was low and horizontal and there was no perspective. The big shimmering glass gallery appeared as a flat picture painted on a gray wall.

But he could see. With terrible clarity he could see himself, Eric Nelson, sleeping in a wooden chair six feet away! Instinctively a cry of horror rose to Nelson's lips, and was voiced as a howl.

Wolf-cry—

His body slept, but he was not in it and he spoke with the voice of a wolf.

Eric Nelson hung for a moment on the brink of madness and then clutched desperately at an explanation. Drugs—Kree had given him some vicious drug and he was having hallucinations. Some of his fear turned to anger against Kree. It was a cursed eerie sensation to stand looking at your own body. He wanted to get back into it, quickly.

He started to move toward it but it did not seem like the motion of will or thought. It was like physical motion. *It was like walking on four feet!*

Sinuous play of ropy muscles, lithely springy joints, the cushioned step of padded paws, the light click of claws on the glassy floor—

Dimly reflected in the glassy wall he saw the whole picture. Eric Nelson slumped sleeping in the chair, Nsharra seated with the eagle perched behind her and Tark at her feet, the great black stallion Hatha, the crouching tiger and Kree—all of them watching. Watching the young dog-wolf Asha pad slowly toward the sleeping man.

Nelson stopped and the reflection of Asha stopped too. He could see the wolf-face looking back at him from the dim mirror of the wall and a cold certainty that was beyond fear grew in his heart.

He began to tremble. He felt his lips draw back, and the mirrored Asha bared white fangs at him. Again Nelson cried out in a wolf's voice and he saw the reflection of Asha lift its head and howl.

Nelson went on toward his sleeping body, tried to touch it. And the image in the wall showed him the young dog-wolf pawing at the chest of the sleeping man and whimpering.

QUORR laughed, a coughing, snarling burst of mockery.

Nsharra spoke, her urgent thought-voice ringing quite clear in Nelson's mind.

"Father, speak to him! Explain to him, before his heart breaks!"

Nelson crouched watching them. He did not stir except that his head moved from side to side in little nervous jerks. He could feel the slow light breathing of his *human* body as his paws touched it.

Kree's thought came slowly. "It is true, outlander. You now inhabit the body of the wolf, Asha."

The strong wild thought of the stallion interrupted. "The power of the ancients! The punishment of those who transgress the Brotherhood!"

Again Quorr, the tiger, looked at Nelson and laughed.

"You should be proud, outlander! For you, the Guardian has made an exception, giving you the useful body of a Clan-brother. If *we* sin, we are banished into the bodies of the little hunted things that are born only to be eaten."

Then, sharp and clear, Ei the great eagle

called out to Nelson. "Courage, outlander!" And Nsharra's softer echo said, "Courage, Eric Nelson."

It was then that Nelson's anger began to creep warm across his icy fear. But still he could not believe.

Stunned, bewildered, his thought went out to Kree. "It isn't possible. No science could do that—my brain in a wolf's body—"

"Not your brain, but your *mind,*" Kree said grimly. "The mind is immaterial, a tenuous web of force. So said the ancients. And they built the instrument that can transfer minds to other bodies. I merely used that instrument.

"It is Asha's body still and Asha's brain. Asha's instincts, memories, latent knowledges are still in that brain and you will have use of them. But the real *you,* your conscious mind, is now in Asha's body and Asha's conscious mind—sleeps."

Nelson felt his new body tense and rise. He cried out bewilderedly, "But why? Why didn't you just kill me?"

"You are hostage for my son Barin," Kree answered. "When Barin is returned to us you will be returned to your own body!"

The anger that had been growing and growing in Nelson burst suddenly into a flame of rage. Rage such as he had never known, the wild anger of the wolf.

That they should have done this to him, Eric Nelson! That they should have dared!

Nelson was dimly aware of a strange linking of his familiar mind to something dark and primal and alien. Man-rage drawing from the deep red wells of the beast. He bared his fangs and snarled. He felt his whole new wolf-body coil tensely tight as he crouched.

Man-rage, beast-rage—memory, instinct, the loosing of the chain—not so alien after all, not so strange! Not so long ago man himself was a hunting beast!

He sprang in a beautiful, deadly, arching leap, straight for Kree.

He heard Nsharra cry out, and then in mid-air he felt the shock of Tark's great leaping body. The wolf's broad breast struck his shoulder, bowled him over to crash on the glassy floor. He slashed out, felt hair and hide tear under his teeth, tasted blood on his tongue.

And then Tark's greater weight was smothering him, Tark's huge jaws had closed on the back of his neck, and Tark was shaking him as a wolf-cub shakes a rat. The leader of the Clan flung Nelson from him, rolling over and over, and stood contemptuous and lordly in his strength, laughing with his red tongue run out between his open jaws.

"You've yet to learn," came his thought, "that I, Tark, lead the pack of the Hairy Ones!"

And Nelson, gathering himself, sent back the raging thought, "But *I* am not of your Clan!"

He sprang again at Tark.

It was strange, how he knew the ways of fighting. To dart in low to snap the foreleg, to use the breast as a ram, to keep the throat always covered, to dodge and dance and whirl and give the long terrible slashing stroke where the hair thins on the side of the opponent's neck, over the vein.

All these things Nelson knew and knew well. He was young and powerful and he was fighting to kill. But it availed him nothing. Tark moved like a wraith before him so that his jaws rang shut on the empty air—and before he could recover himself the old pack lord would smash him off balance with his greater weight and his jaws would chop and slash and then he would be away again, out of reach, laughing.

Nelson sprang and sprang again, and was beaten down, and would not quit. The hot sweet taint of blood reddened the air, and the great black stallion tossed his head and stamped his hoofs on the glassy floor. Quorr wrinkled his striped face in a snarling grin, and his claws ran in and out of their velvet sheaths and his tail twitched.

ONLY EI perched motionless on the back of Nsharra's chair. The girl's face was white and full of pity and there was a sickness in her eyes. She looked pleadingly at her father, who sat watching with dark, somber eyes.

In answer to Nsharra's look Kree sighed and said, "Do not hurt him, Tark—more than you must."

And Tark answered, panting, "He must learn to obey!"

Once more his great jaws ripped, slashed and sent Nelson sprawling.

There came a time when Nelson tried to spring again and could not. Whipped to a standstill, he stood trembling on legs braced far apart, his flanks heaving, his head hanging low. He felt blood and sweat wetting his hairy wolf-body.

Tark's thought asked, "Have you learned, cub?"

Nelson answered, "I have learned." But still the dulled fire of rage burned in him.

Tark's mind said grimly, "Do not forget!"

He trotted back to Nsharra's side and began to lick his fur, keeping one mocking eye on the creature that was Eric Nelson. Kree leaned forward, his deep-set gaze brooding somberly upon the wolf that was Nelson.

"Listen," he said. "Listen, Eric Nelson, to the price of your deliverance."

He waited, as though for Nelson's shaken mind to clear, before he went on.

"Go back to your comrades, Eric Nelson. Go back to the Humanites. Bring my son to me alive and safe and you shall be a man again."

Nelson voiced a bitter, snarling laugh.

"Do you think they'll believe me?" he demanded. "Do you think they'll listen?"

"You must make them listen."

"They'll shoot me on sight."

"They are your comrades, Eric Nelson. They are your problem." Kree turned to the pack-leader and his grim thought ordered, "Tark, start him on his way."

Tark rose and shook himself. He took three soft padding steps toward Nelson and said, "Go."

Nelson faced him sullenly and would not move.

Quorr's thought said, "The cub is forgetful, Tark. You must teach him his lesson again."

And Hatha, eyes rolling, stamped. "Teach him!"

Ei rustled his wings in what sounded like a sigh.

"Remember, outlander," his thought said, "courage is a good quality only when one is wise enough to use it."

"All of you, leave him alone!" cried Nsharra. She put out her hands pleadingly and said, "Please go, Eric Nelson!"

Nelson saw that there were tears on her cheeks. He watched Tark padding toward him, his great body all one coiled and fluid motion. He watched the filtered sunlight gleam on Tark's teeth.

The smell of his own blood rose hot in his nostrils.

Quite suddenly Nelson turned and ran. As though that were a signal, a burst of sound broke from behind him—the stamp and squeal of Hatha, the tiger's echoing roar, a long wolf-howl. They were answered all through the Hall of Clans.

And Nelson, as he ran, heard with the noise the great ringing shout of Tark's mind.

"Clans of the Brotherhood! Send Clan-call forth that Asha the wolf is outlaw!"

Through the glittering corridors and dusty vaulted halls they drove him, out of the building, out into the forested streets of Vruun. With hoof and fang and claw they drove him and always the word ran ahead of him like wildfire:

"Asha the wolf is outlaw—outlaw!"

And he ran, he who was both wolf and man, both Asha and Eric Nelson. He ran along the broad forest ways between the bubble buildings, through the glittering city, and there was no shelter for him.

The eagles swooped and screamed above him. The gray pack loped behind him and, if he tried to dart aside, Hatha's Clan were there with plunging hoofs to bar the way. And everywhere the striped and silent bodies of the Clawed Ones flowed in the shadows, laughing at him.

The men and women of Vruun watched the driving of the outlaw with bitter eyes and they too barred his way. Nelson went the only way left open to him, out of Vruun and into the open forest. He ran belly-flat, choking on his own heart, and he knew how a dog feels when he is driven through a town.

The forest shade gathered him in. The earth was moist and soft under his paws. He fled onward between the trees and, after a time, he realized that the pursuit had drawn back and was dim and far away.

He slowed his pace to a trot and then to a dragging walk. Breathing was an agony, a tearing pain. Where Tark had slashed him the blood oozed and dripped and took his strength with it and his every joint and muscle was a separate ache and soreness.

He crossed a little stream and stopped to drink. Then he lay down in the running water. The icy touch of it burned in his raw flesh.

He rose and slunk on.

Instinct that was not his own but Asha's told him where to lair. He crept into a hollow between two great gnarled roots, where it was warm.

There he lay down and began, wolf-like, to lick his wounds.

Night darkened over the valley of L'Lan.

CHAPTER XI

Forest Danger

HE HAD slept for a time but he had dreamed and the dreams were full of terror. He woke suddenly as a man wakes from nightmare, with a start and a cry, and the howling sound of his own wolf-voice reminded him that the nightmare was reality.

He lay alone in the depths of the nighted forest and suffered as few men have suffered since the beginning of the world. Then, gradually, when he found that he was not going to die or go mad the mind of Eric Nelson began to function again.

Nelson had lived a long time in the wild places of the world. He had spent years on the ragged edge of death and his inner fiber had been hammered into toughness. After the first black wave of horror passed it became a point of pride with him. He would not break. He would not give in and let himself be whipped by anything Kree and his people could do to him.

Again Nelson was conscious of the strange linking of his mind with another mind. Almost without his knowing it, the night and the forest had become familiar. He had spent many nights in the woods but never before had he had this intimate kinship with them. The forest was alive, teeming with its own secret business, and to the new Eric Nelson the secrets were all an open book, infinitely fascinating.

His keen ears told him of the motion of the grasses, the stirring of the trees, the rush of distant water in a stream-bed. Somewhere near him a mouse scuttered across a dry leaf and above him he could hear plainly the squeaking of a bat and the sound its leathery wings made on the air. Far away down the valley a deer went crashing through a deadfall and behind it rose the deep hunting cry of a tiger.

Eric Nelson felt the sweet taut thrill of excitement that passed through his borrowed body. He was hungry. The wind brought him news. He drew it in through quivering nostrils, rich and tangled and throbbing scents, the breath of the forest that was his mother because it had been Asha's mother.

He rose and stretched himself, wincing and grunting because he was very sore. Then he stepped out into the moonlight and stood with his head up, turning it slowly to quarter the wind, his nose twitching.

Downwind it was all a blank but upwind a small pack of wolves was driving a buck. They were going away from him and he must remember to stay clear. The tiger had killed. Down by the stream a band of Hoofed Ones had come to drink, and there were deer with them.

He would not run a deer. The whole forest would know of it. He would be content with a rabbit. Grim determination steeled Nelson's mind. He was going to Anshan and somehow he would bring Barin back to Vruun. But in the meantime they had made him a wolf. Very well, he would be a wolf.

The distant hunting call of the pack moaned and wailed down the valley. His throat quivered to answer it but he kept silent. Then, like a lean gray wraith in the splashing silver moonlight, he loped away south, toward Anshan.

At first it was difficult to move but as his stiff body warmed and loosened he forgot his hunger in the delight of going. His man-body had been a pretty good one. It was tough and lithe and quicker than most. But it was a dull clumsy thing compared to the one he had now.

The body of Asha was sensitively alive, from the bottoms of its padded paws to the tip of its nose. Every nerve and muscle worked to a hair-trigger reflex. It could thread its way like a lightning-flash through a thicket of brush and never so much as stir a leaf. It could stop stock-still without a quiver and it could soar over a deadfall like an arrow going home. And it could run. Gods of the forest, how it could run!

Nelson had know that when they drove him out of Vruun. But there had been no pleasure in running then. Now he sped down the open ridges for the sheer joy of it, rushing through the pools of moonlight, whirling and pouncing, playing delightedly with the shadows.

Hysteria, Nelson thought. *Bravado, reaction against fear. But why not? Why not?*

He crept upwind upon a little band of deer feeding by a pond. For a time he lay in the long grass and watched them, slender lovely things with their moist black noses and great eyes. A tall buck and two does and a fawn. The rich sweet odor of them made his mouth water.

PRESENTLY he rose and walked boldly out into the clearing. They lifted their heads and froze, staring at him—fleet-limbed children of flight and fear. Then they snorted the wolf-taint out of their nostrils and were gone.

He went to the pool and drank. His reflection looked up at him from the moonlit water and he ran his tongue over his teeth and glared back wolf-eyed at himself.

He went southward again, ever southward toward Anshan, and he found no rabbits. He began to be aware that the game was moving. Time and again he crossed the new trails of deer and smaller beasts, all drifting westward. Word had gone through the forest that even the true beasts who were not of the Brotherhood could understand, and they were moving on both sides of the river, back to the barrier cliffs, leaving the forest to the Clans.

The wind, which had been blowing steadily from the south, dropped and then died altogether. Nelson felt a strange muffling of his senses then. It was like being partly blind and deaf because he could no longer tell what was happening upwind. He moved with increased caution and he was hungry, very hungry.

He came down to the edge of a wide shallow stream and suddenly, with a flying clatter of hoofs, a dappled mare and her foal came splashing across the ford and up the low bank beside him.

"Greetings, Hairy One," came the mare's thought. She stopped to blow and, through Asha's wolf-senses, Nelson could smell the fear on her. The little inky-black foal whickered and pushed his head against his mother's flank, his long ridiculous legs planted far apart and trembling. Both of them were streaked with sweat.

"You have run far, oh Sister," said Nelson, through Asha's mind.

"North from Anshan," answered the mare, and shivered. She nosed the foal's thin neck tenderly and added, "I could not come before because of him."

"Anshan?" said Nelson. "I go toward there now."

"I know. The Clans are gathering for war." The rolling eyes of the mare showed white in the moonlight. "There is death in the forest, Hairy One! There is death in the valley of L'Lan!"

And the little black foal started. With lifted head and rolling eyes in imitation of his mother, he echoed, "Death! Death! Death!" His tiny hoofs made a rattling sound on the stones.

"Hush, little one," whispered the mare and stroked his quivering neck. "What do you know of death?"

"I have smelled it," said the foal. "Red in the wind." His nostrils showed pink as they flared to his frightened breathing.

"I pastured on the slopes above Anshan," the mare told Nelson, "because my mate was taken by the Humanites and I wanted to be near him. The foal was born there. There was killing in the valley below us. The outlanders had come with their new fire-weapons and many of the Brotherhood were killed."

"Death," said the foal again, and whinnied like a child crying. "I am afraid."

Nelson reassured with his thought. "You're safe now, little one. There is no death here."

But there would be, Nelson knew. Sooner or later the fire-weapons would bring death to the gates of Vruun and the little foal, if he lived, would one day be bitted and shod and bridled, broken to bear the weight of man.

Looking at them there in the moonlight, Nelson was aware of a strange revulsion at that thought, as though they had been his own kind, enslaved and toiling in chains.

The mare's gentle thought came into his mind.

"Take care, Hairy One, if you go toward Anshan. Shan Kar and the outlanders have cleared the forest edges of our scouts and their weapons guard the city well."

Then she turned to the foal. "Come, little fleet one. Only a little farther, and then you can rest."

He watched them go, the dappled mare with her flowing mane and tail, a graceful shape of silver in the moonlight, her ink-black foal rocking along beside her. Light feet that had never known the weight of iron shoes, proud high heads that had never bent to the curb and the cutting bit.

Nelson had always liked horses as a man likes them. Treat them well, take pride in them, feed and groom them and occasionally drop the old phrase, "That horse is almost human!"

But these of Hatha's Clan were different. By whatever unholy alchemy the thing had been done, these horses *were* human, in intelligence. He remembered the bitter pride

of the captive Hoofed Ones in Anshan, when he had ridden out with Tark and Lefty and Shan Kar on their ill-starred mission.

He turned slowly to cross the stream but he did it mechanically, because he had been headed that way before. Nelson's mind had been jarred and some gate had opened between it and the subconscious mind of the wolf. He remembered Kree's words, *"Asha's instincts, memories, latent knowledges—"*

Memories.

He had been too occupied before with his own terror and his own rage and, after that, the miracle of new and alien sensation. But now a whole spate of memories stored away in Asha's mind broke loose and flooded into Nelson's. They were not the simple memories of an animal but, in their own strange way, as human as his own.

CUBS rolling in the sun-warmed grass, the newness of the world, the lessons, the first hunt, the first kill, the first sight of Vruun's glittering towers, the entering of the young wolf into the full rights of the pack. Little details, tastes and smells and thoughts and dreams. Yes, dreams, akin to those of the boy Eric Nelson lying under his green Ohio trees, half asleep in the summer stillness.

But these were only the ripples on the broad deep river of Asha's mind. Below them ran strong the currents that bound the individual to the Clan and the Clan to the Brotherhood. In the flashing glimpse of Asha's past Nelson saw a whole new way of life, where intelligent beings had adjusted themselves to a society that was at once as simple as Eden and as complex as modern New York.

A society in which the five great clans—man and wolf, horse and tiger and eagle—lived in perfect equality without even thinking about it, just as in Nelson's own world different races of men lived together and accepted it as natural. A society with its own laws, that forbade murder and theft and governed the rights of the hunt, and in which loyalty was freely given. A sort of freemasonry that was in very reality a brotherhood.

They were not perfect, these creatures of the Clans. Some of the memory-flashes gave Nelson a jolt of fear and others made him laugh at the spectacle of foolishness. Again he felt contempt because he had seen cowardice or the theft of another's kill. But their very imperfections made them the more human.

When he shut his mental eyes and looked only at their minds Nelson was forced at last to realize the truth without reservation. The creatures of the Clans were no more beasts than he. Less, he was forced to admit, for he had killed for money, whereas the Brotherhood killed only for food. And he had killed men, whereas the Brotherhood killed only the deer and the rabbit.

Quite suddenly it did not seem strange at all to Nelson that he was trotting on four legs through the forest. The intimate contact with Asha's mind had dissolved that strangeness. It seemed no more to him now than if he had put on a foreign dress. He was at home.

Abruptly a hare bolted in front of him. He caught it in easy bounds and broke its back and fed.

It was then that the gray brothers of the pack came upon him, drifting silently between the trees from the east. He had no wind to warn him and his hunger had betrayed him into carelessness. He started up from his half-eaten kill and would have run, only that the leader, an old gray dog-wolf who lacked an eye, uttered a thought to him.

"Finish your kill, young one. There is not that much haste."

The old wolf sat down, his tongue lolling out. "Besides, we have run far, from the hills above Mreela. We would rest."

Through Asha's eyes, Nelson saw that these were lean and ragged wolves from an outlying tribe that ranged the upper levels. They did not know him, did not know that he was outlaw.

He finished his meal in gulps, crunching down the last sweet bones. Then he licked his lips and waited. The long wailing *Hai-oo!* of the Clan-call rose across the river and was answered and answered again.

The old wolf told him, "We go toward Anshan to watch."

"I, too."

"Then go with us, young one."

He could not get away from them without arousing suspicion. He must join them now, and later see what was best to do.

The lean gray shapes rose, ten of them, long-fanged hunters of the barren heights, full of a quivering excitement. Almost, Nelson felt as he ran that he was really Asha, running with his own kind.

But he was not. His kind, Nelson's kind,

lay in wait at Ansham with machine-guns and grenades.

When the first light of dawn began to pale the sky, he and the pack were miles southward. He started to drift away from the upland pack. He would be safer now alone. He must find some place to lie up until it was dark again before he made his attempt to enter Anshan. By night he had one chance in a hundred of succeeding without being shot on sight as a spy from Vruun. By day he had none.

Nelson would have slipped safely away as he planned had not the dawn wind risen and betrayed him.

HE WAS lagging behind the others, watching his chance to slide off into the brush, when from downwind came a sudden barking cry and with it a mental call—"Ho, brothers! There is a stranger with you!"

The whole of the upland pack turned and faced Nelson, instantly suspicious. Before he could run wolves were all about him, Wolves from Vruun, whose minds spoke in chorus like one great curse.

"Asha!"

Nelson wheeled and leaped clean over the old dog-wolf, breaking for the shelter of the brush.

Behind him, as it had in Vruun, the mental shout went baying through the trees.

"Asha is outlaw! Drive him, brothers! Drive him from the forest!"

Then the pack was after him in full cry and the call was echoing all across the valley, tossed from one pack to another and picked up and carried on until it burst from the hillsides in a wailing malediction.

"Outlaw!"

Once again Nelson ran, belly-down and straining. Ahead of him lay the open plains around Anshan and in them lay death. Desperately he swerved and dodged and circled but the wolves of the Clan drove and drove him without mercy. There was no escape.

The forest began to thin. In the distance between the trees he could see the open flatness of the plain. Far out upon it Anshan burned like a great jewel in its setting of green forest by the river.

He crouched, trapped and desperate, tried to think.

Abruptly, overhead, he heard the whistling thunder of great wings and leaped up, snarling. Then he saw that it was Ei and he heard Ei's mind speaking to him with urgent swiftness.

"This way, outlander! You can dodge the pack if you do as I order."

He could do not worse than obey.

The eagle swooped skyward again, where he could see the movements of the whole pack, and sent his guarded thought down to Nelson.

"Run hard this way, outlander! Now. Into the pool. Swim, swim quickly, upstream. Stay in the water, the wind is with you. Now! Under the overhang of the bank there and crouch still—still!"

Nelson crouched, wet and shivering, half submerged, and heard the pack swing past him and go on. Presently Ei swooped down and perched on a nearby rock. Nelson crawled out where it was drier and lay panting.

"We will wait," the eagle told him, and composed himself.

Nelson studied the other. Finally he sent a questioning thougbt. "I don't understand. Why should *you* come to help me?"

And Ei answered, "Nsharra sent me."

CHAPTER XII

Death in Anshan

ALL through the long hot hours of the day they hid there, waiting—the great eagle and the man who was now a wolf. It was the dry season. Nelson could see how tbe stream bad dropped in its rocky bed and the scent of pine needles lay beavy on the warm still air. All the forest seemed to sleep.

They talked, the two of them, with their thoughts.

Once Nelson said, "You seem friendly to me, Ei. You stood up for me in the Council Hall. I don't understand."

The eagle answered, "You saved one of my Clan from torture by Shan Kar. The other Winged One, who escaped, saw and told."

"I see." Nelson was silent for a time. Then he said, "I have learned many things in the forest, Ei. I have learned many things from tbe mind of Asha, which I share. I would like to learn also from yours if it is possible."

He caught the bright, sharp glance from

Ei's golden eyes. A look that was wise and understanding.

"It is possible," Ei said. "Let your mind relax."

Nelson laid his rough wolf's head on his paws and let his eyes drop shut. The heat of the day made it easy to relax. Almost he dropped into a half doze.

And then his mind was touched by another. A wise mind, wiser far than Asha's because it was far older, a mind whetted and honed to razor sharpness by the upper air, keen as the eagle's curving beak and sharp as his talons—able to grip and tear and worry a thought until its inner bones lay bare and truthful.

Once again Nelson had the strange experience of seeing the world through the eyes of another being.

He saw the whole valley of L'Lan spread out below him, so far down that the great trees of the forest appeared as a mere roughness of texture, like a tapestry thrown over the knees of the mountains. He saw the high crags of the barrier cliffs, leaping and thrusting up into the sky, tossing the cold winds from their shoulders in flying clouds of snow, exulting in the sun.

In imagination his lungs were filled with air that was thin and pure and more intoxicating than wine. He felt the surging strength of mighty wings and flung himself headlong into the buffeting, swirling gales that swept among the high peaks and fought them joyously as a swimmer fights the surf. He knew the long whistling rush of the swoop, the exquisite precision of the tilting wing, the excitement of the strike and kill.

All this, and much more. The gossip and the quarrels of the eyries, the time of mating and the young. The first flight, when the young untried wings plunge out into the blue gulf and beat and stagger and hold. And the long silent times when Ei and the others like him would perch on the high crags and brood, thinking—thinking with minds like those of men, there among the vast upper reaches, where thought must be as broad as the heavens and as clean as the snow.

Here again, more clearly and strongly than before, in the older wisdom of Ei's thought, Nelson felt the power of the Clan law and the Brotherhood. L'Lan was a world unto itself. No matter how the social order ran between man and beast in the outer world, here the Brotherhood was right. The rough but obvious parallel of tyranny and democracy occurred to him.

He began suddenly to detest Shan Kar. As for Sloan and Piet Van Voss and himself, he was filled with loathing. Not for the first time he thought back over the years of his life and was conscious of a bitter regret.

He thought somberly, "The wolf and the tiger of the outer world, who have only the minds of beasts, are worthier than I."

Ei answered quietly, "Not one of us lives who is without shame at one time or another. It is not the end of the world."

There was silence for a time between their thoughts, and then Nelson asked, "Why did Nsharra send you?"

"She will tell you that herself," Ei answered. "Wait."

The long still hours of the afternoon wheeled over them. The drooping forest brooded and, beneath the trees, the watching scouts of the Clans slept with sheathed claw and covered fang, a light and uneasy sleep. At sunset Ei flew off and at dusk he returned, guiding Nsharra. She rode the black stallion, Hatha, and Tark loped beside her, his lolling tongue dripping in the heat.

At sight of Tark, Nelson sprang up, bristling. But Tark flung himself down in the cool water and rolled, luxuriating.

"A long run from Vruun, in the dry season," came his thought. He snapped the water between his jaws, biting it like a puppy.

NELSON watched Nsharra as she slid from Hatha's back. Even now, when with his wolf's vision all her exquisite coloring was dulled to a monotony of black and gray and the pure white of her skin, he thought that she was the loveliest thing he had ever seen.

He had no anger for her now. All that was long burned out of him and he knew that, in Kree's place, he would have done the same or worse. All he remembered was that Nsharra had pleaded for him and that there had been tears on her cheeks.

The wild hope rose in him that she had come to take him back to Vruun to his own body.

She divined his thought and said, "Not yet, Eric Nelson."

Nelson's whole body drooped with the sickening shock of disappointment and then he felt Nsharra's hand on his rough head and heard her thought.

"I am not without heart, outlander. My father has given you an impossible task. I have brought Tark and Hatha and Ei to help you."

"Without Kree's knowledge," growled Tark, who had obviously been persuaded against his will.

Hatha snorted and added, "The lightning will not equal his anger when he learns of it."

Nelson told the girl. "You're not doing this for me."

She looked at him steadily and answered, "The one goes with the other. If you fail my brother Barin will die. My father would sacrifice him if necessary, as he would sacrifice me or himself for the good of the Clans. But I want to save him. Therefore I must save you."

"That's all clear," said Nelson grimly. "Well, I'm ready."

But they waited in silence until full dark.

Then Tark rose and shook himself. He ordered, "You will wait here, Nsharra."

When she started to protest they all three cried her down, Hatha refusing to carry her. She went to the very edge of the forest with them, sat down sulkily to wait. Then her face cleared.

"Good luck," came her thought and, for a second, Nelson had a queer feeling that she meant that for him too—for Eric Nelson, apart from Barin or anything else.

Then Ei's wings thundered as they beat up into the dark sky, and the three of them, Tark and Hatha and the wolf Asha who was Eric Nelson, slipped silently out across the plain toward Anshan.

Ei soared over them, watching the Humanite outposts, sending down his thought-word of the movements of the guards. Nelson realized that, even with his keen wolf-senses, he could never have made it alone through the outer defenses. Sloan's military genius, long trained in guerilla warfare, shone out in the way he had placed his sentinels so that almost every inch of the plain was under surveillance.

Hatha said, "We must make it before moonrise. I am not small enough to hide like a mouse in the grass with you Hairy Ones."

They went on silently, swiftly, following the direction of Ei's mind as he threaded them like a needle though the sentries, taking advantage of every blade of grass and every fold of the ground.

The stallion was black as the night itself and there was no skyline to show him against the background of the forest. His hoofs fell daintily as dry leaves on the turf. The two wolves were no more than two wisps of gray smoke blown on the wind.

EVEN so, twice they were almost discovered, lying flat until it was safe to creep on again. The first flooding silver of the moonlight touched the eastern peaks as they slipped into the shelter of the woods that bordered the river. Silent as shadows, they followed the winding forest ways into the city.

Night lay heavy on Anshan. The long forested avenues brooded, deserted and silent. Where for countless centuries the hoofed and padded feet of the Clans had walked, the dust and the dry leaves blew lonely on the wind and even the birds had gone.

The bubble-domes and the towers glistened cold as black ice under the rising moon and, where the buildings fronted on the forest ways, the empty doorways watched them pass and gaped in silent woe.

Where are they now, the children of the Brotherhood? Where have they gone, the tall hunters, and the Winged Ones, and the mothers with their cubs?

The trees made a sound of weeping in the night wind and they were answered by the hollow voices of the eyrie-towers high above, where the nests of the eagles had fallen into dust.

Where the Humanites lived, in the midst of this desertion, torches burned inside the walls, so that here and there a building would burst upon the darkness in a blaze of sullen light. But there was no sound of revelry or excitement. The Humanites hovered on the edge of war. They were tensely ready but they were not gay.

No one saw the four beasts who went swift and quiet down the dark forest avenues toward the palace of Anshan. Near it, Nelson heard the stallion's angry snort. The wind had brought him scent of his mates, those enslaved ones penned in the Humanite stables.

"Silence!" snapped Tark. "Do you want to rouse the city?"

"My Clan-brothers!" came Hatha's fierce thought. "Slaves of the Humanites. Should I rejoice?" His hoofbeats quickened. "By the Cavern, I'll free them!"

TARK sprang at his nose, his teeth clicking purposely just close enough to give the stallion pause.

"You'll ruin everything," Tark said furiously. "Our first task is to get Barin safely away. After that we'll see."

"He is right, Hatha," came Ei's thought.

Reluctantly, sullenly, Hatha consented.

"You and Ei must wait here," Tark said. "The outlander and I can move better inside. Keep watch and be ready if we meet trouble."

The two waited, the eagle perched high in a tree-top, the stallion sulking in the darkness below. Nelson and Tark were two slinking wolf-shadows as they went through the darkness toward the palace. They avoided the big open doorway through which they could glimpse the great torchlit entrance hall.

Instead they circled the palace until they found a side entrance, inside which they could scent no guards. They slipped into the building and paused, sniffing. Then on through the dusty deserted corridors of the sleeping pile they went and came at last to the rooms where Nelson and his comrades had been quartered.

It is very strange, thought Nelson, *that now I creep into these rooms on four feet and that, before I enter, I know that only Li Kin is here.*

One dim lamp burned in the room. The little Chinese lay on his cot, his face relaxed in sleep—the face, Nelson thought, of an unhappy child, hollowed with a long hunger of the soul. He felt a warm surge of affection for Li Kin.

"Wait," he told Tark. "I will wake him."

Tark waited, his nose wrinkling with disgust at the alien odors of the outlanders. Nelson padded over to the cot, wondering how to wake Li Kin without causing him to cry out in terror and bring the others running. He felt that he could talk to Li Kin alone of all these men he had fought and drunk with for so long.

He hesitated over the sleeping man and Li Kin stirred and moaned uneasily. Then Nelson saw the dull platinum circle of the thought-crown that lay with Li Kin's things beside the bed. He picked it up carefully in his jaws and laid it by Li Kin's head. At the touch of the cold metal the Chinese stirred again and sighed.

The thought-crown was not in place but Nelson hoped that the contact would enable him to get through a message to Li Kin's relaxed mind. He remembered how he had heard Nsharra and Tark all those centuries ago in Yen Shi.

"Li Kin," he sent his urgent thought. "Wake, Li Kin, and do not fear. It is I, Eric Nelson."

Over and over, soothingly, and presently Li Kin opened his eyes and said aloud in a startled voice. "Who calls?"

Then he saw the gray wolf standing over him and Tark's eyes burning green in the shadows and his mouth opened for a scream.

Nelson leaped. He smothered the cry and crushed Li Kin's slight body with his own weight until he stopped struggling. Then he lifted the thought-crown again in his teeth and offered it. Staring wildly, Li Kin took the thing in shaking hands and put it on.

"Li, it is I—Eric Nelson!" he thought swiftly.

"Nelson?" came Li Kin's numb thought. His eyes dilated in horror. "It is a nightmare. I am dreaming."

Nelson's thoughts raced, telling the other

[*Turn page*]

THEY MADE DAILY ROCKET TRIPS TO THE MOON—

but at the same time still rode around in Model-T Fords. They took for granted an alien race of weird-looking creatures—and gave the equivalent of two hundred dollars for a quarter! No wonder Keith Winton was bewildered when he met his neighbors in

WHAT MAD UNIVERSE

By FREDRIC BROWN

NEXT ISSUE'S SURPRISING COMPLETE NOVEL

what happened. Li Kin shook his head.

"Sorcery. The power of those who were before man." Then, heavily, "We did evil, Eric Nelson, to come to L'Lan with our weapons. For that evil we shall die."

"Very probably," Nelson answered, "but just now I need your hands to release Barin, so that I can get my own hands back. Will you help?"

Li Kin nodded. It was a dazed queer sort of nod. Nelson knew what Li Kin was thinking. He was thinking that the heavy sword of Fate was weighing upon the woven strand of his years and would presently cut it through and that, in the woven strand, there were few bright strands, very few among the many that were strained and drab.

"Of course," nodded Li Kin. "I will help." He fumbled for his spectacles, put them on and rose, pulling his jacket straight. Then he went out with the two wolves trotting like two silent shadows at his heels.

The corridors were empty, the moonlight falling through the vaulted glass in a strange dusky light such as is seen only in dream.

Li Kin's thought informed them, "The others hold council."

"Why aren't you with them?" Nelson asked.

Li Kin shrugged. "I can better spend my time in sleep. You know how much my word weighs with Sloan."

They came to the prison wing. Here as before the torches flared but now there were no guards. Nelson and Tark, who had slipped back into the shadows, rejoined the little Chinese.

Li Kin's thought was puzzled. "I can't understand it. Shan Kar keeps the boy under guard at all times."

Something came drifting to Nelson on the sluggish air. A little red whisper that made his nerve-ends ripple. He saw the hackles ridge up along Tark's spine and then the two of them ran ahead of Li Kin, going low to the ground with a slinking gait, up to the door of Barin's cell.

Before Li Kin unbarred the door, they knew what they would see.

Barin lay on the floor. The smell of death was on him, and the smell of blood. He had died only a short time before and he had not died easily. The reek of Piet Van Voss was strong in the little room.

Tark's sorrow burst from him in one wailing cry that was quickly checked. Nelson caught the wild, raging thought of the Clan-leader.

"I will avenge!"

CHAPTER XIII

The Fight in the Palace

FOR a long moment they stood, the three of them, without movement or speech. The dead boy lay looking quietly into eternity, and there was no sound save the hissing of the torches as they burned. Nothing stirred but the flames, their light running ragged and uncertain over the gleaming walls.

Over and over, above his horror at the brutality of this thing, the thought tolled like a bell in Nelson's mind: *Barin is dead, and I shall never be a man again.*

It was a thought he could not face.

"I knew nothing of this," said Li Kin out of the depths of shame—shame that his own kind could have done such a thing. "I swear it."

Nelson realized then that Tark had swung around toward Li Kin and that there was death in his green eyes.

Nelson sprang, interposing his wolf body between them.

"Wait, Tark!" he thought swiftly. "Li Kin speaks the truth. He, of all of us, never wished to come here, never wished your people harm. Sloan was here and Van Voss. Not this one."

Tark's hairy body quivered. He did not seem to have heard.

Nelson told him, "Tark, listen to me! Barin was the price of my body. I want as much as you to punish those who did this. And for that we need Li Kin's help. Do you hear me?"

Slowly, reluctantly, Tark answered, "I hear." He relaxed but not much. "Let us go and find the others."

The torchlight gleamed like blood upon his fangs. "No," said Nelson. "Li Kin and I will go. You'll wait."

Swiftly, over Tark's snarling protest, he pressed home the truth. "You know the outland weapons. You'd be dead before you could spring. You can better avenge Barin by staying alive to fight for the Brotherhood."

"Very well," came Tark's thought finally. Then, suspiciously, "What have *you* to say to these men, Eric Nelson?"

"I have much to say," answered Nelson grimly, looking at Barin. Then he added ironically, "Don't worry, Tark. Even if I would I can't betray you. You have the best hostage a man can give—his own body!"

Tark growled assent and lay down like a great dog beside the dead boy to wait.

Li Kin said with a terrible lack of emotion, "They are not men, those two. They are butchers. They are lower than the brutes."

He was a very tired man, Li Kin. Nelson could feel the overpowering weariness of his mind. Weary of war and bloodshed and suffering and the pointless days that wandered on to nowhere. Weary of tears that had long ago been shed, of memories that were fainter than forgotten dreams, of the very beating of his heart.

"Let us go," said Nelson and led the way out of the cell.

They found Sloan and Van Voss together in the vast gloomy Council Hall. They were alone. They had a jar of wine on the table between them and their faces in the flaring torchlight were the faces of happy men.

They glanced up as Li Kin entered and then, as they saw the wolf-shape that moved beside him, they sprang up, reaching for their guns.

Li Kin flung up his hand to stop them. He bent down, shielding Nelson's wolf-body with his own body, and said with a strange dreamy smile. "Put on the thought-crowns, my friends. You are about to learn something of the powers you fight against."

Nelson watched them as they picked up the platinum circles and put them on, frowning, their hands still ready on their gun-butts.

He sent his thought out to them. "Haven't you a word of welcome for me—Eric Nelson?"

Van Voss swore and drew his gun. "A beast-spy from Vruun, who tries to trick us like children! Get out of the way, Li Kin."

But Sloan snapped, "Hold on, Piet." Nelson could feel his mind probing, testing.

Nelson told them, "You don't believe? Then listen."

Rapidly, he reminded them of things they had done together that only Eric Nelson could know. Gradually Van Voss' heavy jaw fell and his gun slid back into the holster. He sat down, staring.

Sloan let out a long harsh breath and swore softly. "How was this done and why?"

"The punishment of the Guardian!" said a voice from across the hall—a voice full of fear.

THE voice was Shan Kar's. He came from a side door across the shadowy hall, his eyes drugged with sleep. Apparently the voices had awakened him and he had come in time to hear.

He looked at Nelson with fear-wide eyes. "Kree did this to you, didn't he?"

"Yes, he did." Nelson told them all that had happened.

Sloan's hard brown face was tight. "Then you have to take Barin back to get your own body back?"

"Yes," Nelson answered. "And I've just come from Barin."

"So you know, do you?" Sloan said calmly.

"Yes, I know," Nelson told him. He added, with all his hatred throbbing in his thought, "You murdering swine."

Shan Kar looked bewildered. "What has happened to Barin?"

"Torture," Nelson answered. "Death."

He kept his wolf-gaze on Sloan and Van Voss, and Li Kin also regarded them with the eyes of a man sitting in judgment.

Shan Kar swung to Sloan. "It's not true, is it?"

Sloan shrugged. "I had Piet work the kid over. He could have talked. Was it our fault if he made it tough for himself?"

Sloan grinned. "You should have realized what I did, Nelson. If the Guardian of the Brotherhood holds the secret of the way into the Cavern as an hereditary trust his son would know it too."

And now you know it."

"That's right, Nelson. Now *I* know it."

Shan Kar said incredulously, "You tortured that secret out of him?"

"Come off it," Sloan answered disgustedly. "You'd have killed him yourself."

"A clean death, the fortunes of war—that's one thing," said Shan Kar. "But torture of a helpless prisoner, a boy—"

"Listen," said Nick Sloan harshly, "I came here for platinum and I'm going to get it. I have the secret of the Cavern now and in the morning we start our drive on Vrunn. If you're with me, Shan Kar, that's fine. If you're not that's fine too, and the Brotherhood, what's left of it, can do what they want

to you after I'm gone."

He grinned and added, "From what they did to Nelson I don't think you'd like what they'd do to you."

Quorr's words came back to Nelson. *If we sin, we are banished into the bodies of the little hunted-things that are born only to be eaten.*

He saw the look that came over Shan Kar's face and knew that he too was thinking of that.

But Shan Kar straightened his shoulders and told Sloan, "That is an empty boast. You can never take Vruun or the Cavern without us."

"He's right," Nelson put it edgedly. "I've been a day and night in the forest. The Clans are out in full force, waiting. They'll pull you down and tear you to pieces in the woods."

Sloan smiled and shook his head. "Oh, no," he said. "They won't because there won't be any woods."

Nelson stiffened. He knew Sloan, and he knew that something particularly horrible and efficient had been planned. "What do you mean?"

"Simple," Sloan answered. "The prevailing wind blows north toward Vruun and in this dry season the woods are like tinder. All it needs is a few little matches."

"Fire!"

The mind of Eric Nelson, which was a human mind, recoiled in horror from the plan, so beautifully simple, so unutterably cruel. And his body, which was the body of a wolf, was shaken to its very core by a fear that was as old as the first four-footed creature who fled from a rush of burning lava.

"But you can't do that!" Shan Kar said unbelievingly. "The suffering, the destruction—"

Li Kin echoed, "Sloan, you can't!"

"Oh, lord!" said Sloan with the utter contempt of the professional for the amateur. "What are we fighting here, a war or a tea-party? Naturally there'll be suffering and destruction. There will also be a victory and it won't cost us anything but the price of a few matches. What more do you want, Shan Kar? I'm handing you L'Lan on a platter!"

He slammed his hand down hard on the table. "Are you with me, Shan Kar, or aren't you?"

The Humanite leader looked sick. But after a while he nodded. "We'll be with you, Sloan. We have no other choice now."

"I thought you'd understand that," Sloan said curtly. Then he turned and looked at the wolf that was Eric Nelson. "Nelson, you're in a cursed creepy jam. But we'll use that trick machine you told about to get you back into your own body, when we take Vruun."

NELSON sent him a level thought. "Sloan, I'm not helping you to take Vruun, or conquer the Brotherhood. Your murder of Barin and this plan to destroy the Clans—they mean that I'm through with you."

"You'd go back on the bargain that you made with me?" Shan Kar demanded.

"I made no bargain," Nelson reminded swiftly. "I told you in Yen Shi that I would make no bargains in the dark. And you kept us in the dark, Shan Kar.

"You kept us in ignorance of what the Brotherhood you want to shatter is really like, of what you're really trying to do here. Now you're going to help Sloan bring fire and death to this valley. I tell you straight, from here on I'm against you!"

Sloan laughed harshly. "You're forgetting something, Nelson. You're forgetting that we're your only chance of getting your body back! You can't do a thing *but* string along with us."

"I can go back to Vruun," Nelson told him.

"Go back and tell them that Barin's dead?" jeered the other. "You'd not only be a wolf then, you'd be a dead wolf."

"I'd rather be that than an accomplice in what you plan to do!" flashed Nelson.

Sloan's eyes narrowed. "If that's so I might as well make you a dead wolf right here and save you the trip."

His gun started to flash out. But Li Kin's voice stopped him. Out of the corner of his eye Nelson saw that Li Kin had already drawn his gun and that it was as steady as a rock in his hand.

"Drop it, Sloan," he said.

Sloan dropped it.

Piet Van Voss sat perfectly still behind the table, his hands out of sight. His face appeared stupid with surprise.

"What is this?" Sloan demanded. "More mutiny in the ranks?"

Li Kin said, "I'm with Nelson."

Sloan's hard brown face cracked in a

derisive smile. "That's fine," he said. "I hope you're more use to him—"

Van Voss fired from under the table. The shot thundered and rang from the high glassy walls in ricocheting echoes.

Li Kin dropped his weapon, put both hands over his stomach and sat down with an expression of surprise on his face. Then he slumped forward. Sloan's voice went calmly on, after that pause.

"—than you were to me," he finished. Then, jerking around, he yelled, "Watch him, Piet!"

Nelson was already in mid-leap, his wolf-body going like an arrow for the Dutchman's throat.

His teeth met in the flesh of the man's forearm, flung up to ward him off. They fell to the floor in a crashing tangle. Sloan stooped swiftly to pick up his gun.

Suddenly, from nowhere, Tark came like a leaping shadow. His charge knocked Sloan rolling. Shan Kar turned and ran from the room.

Above the yells and the curses and the worrying, growling sounds Nelson caught Tark's mental cry.

"There is no time now, outlander! Others come and Shan Kar is raising the alarm. The palace is a trap!"

He turned and raced for the door with Nelson after him. Behind them, Sloan and Van Voss, bleeding and half-stunned, were able to muster only one wild shot before the two darting wolf-shapes had vanished down the long dark corridor.

Tark's mind sent out a rallying cry. "Hatha! Ei! We are discovered!"

They tore onward through the labyrinth of corridors, shoulder to shoulder. As they ran Nelson sent a swift thought.

"You saved my life. How—?"

"I did not trust you *completely*, outlander," Tark answered. "I crept close to the Council Hall and listened to your thoughts."

He checked suddenly. "They come. The way is blocked."

They had reached the head of the great entrance hall, a broad, high-arched, gloomy immensity, lighted by torches set along its glassy walls. Through the wide open doors at its far end Nelson could see the dark trees of the forest avenue outside.

Out there was safety and escape. But they were barred from it. The broad open doorway was full of torch-flames and running men as hastily-summoned Humanite warriors came pouring into the hall.

There was no other way out and no turning back. For they could hear Sloan and Van Voss coming fast behind them.

Tark eyed the Humanites and their naked swords and then uttered a curt, sharp thought.

"Rush them!"

He shot off down the hall like a streak of gray lightning, with Nelson beside him.

CHAPTER XIV

Return to Doom

FOR Nelson, it was a strange, weird battle. More so even than his fight with Tark, because this time he was fighting men. There was something beautiful about it. To sweep in under the flash of a falling blade, leap and slash and twist away, then dodge and leap again. He had not realized that men were so slow and weak, their flesh so soft to tear, so naked. He felt contempt for them.

A savage joy in his own wolf-strength swept over him. He hurled himself high in the air, right over the striking sword that would have split him open, saw terror widen in the swordsman's eyes, heard him cry out. Then he felt his own jaws snap and crunch an arm, heard the yell of pain and the clatter of the sword falling to the floor.

But it was no use. Men might be soft and slow but there were many of them. More came running into the doorway as word went forth that the wolves of Vruun were trapped. And their swords could bite, deep and deadly as fangs.

Nelson and Tark recoiled, panting, and for all their swiftness they had not come off unmarked. Ears flattened, bellies down, they crouched for one brief moment as doom closed in on them. For behind them, Sloan and Van Voss had entered the big hall. Their guns were ready but they could not fire yet for fear of killing the Humanites.

Nelson licked his own blood off his lips, and said, "I go."

Tark's answer came. "I, too. Farewell, outlander."

The two lean gray shapes gathered themselves for what they knew would be their

last charge against that wall of swords.

Then, above the clamor, Nelson heard from outside the high shrill screams of Hatha's Clan rise like trumpets on the night and the rolling drumbeats of their hoofs.

Hatha had freed his imprisoned mates and his thought-cry rang out to the fighting wolves—"We come, brothers!"

And they came. Out of the darkness, through the wide door that long ago had been made for the clans to enter, into the big hall itself they came, their hoofbeats ringing on the glassy floor. They shook the torchlight from their gleaming hides and squealed and reared like giants under the high-arched roof as they trampled the Humanites down.

Hatha led them—a demon, a shape of darkness, a living hate. He stood on his hind legs and screamed, the terrible ripping cry of his kind. Nelson saw him, towering high, teeth bared and mane flying, the great muscles of his breast flecked with foam, his eyes flaming and his fore-hoofs striking out like slim instruments of death.

"It is *our* vengeance, gray brothers! Let be!"

Vengeance of the captive, of the slave. Nelson could see on their backs the marks of lash and club and on the necks the scars of the rope. They were fouled with stable dirt and dust and crusted blood, these who had bathed in mountain streams and combed their manes with the wind. And they were bitter for their vengeance.

The wolves were forgotten. They ran between the staggering legs of men, under the bellies of the horses and on outside, lest they themselves be trampled. They crouched out there in the shadows, watching.

The big hall was full of sounds of hoofs and running men and death. Nelson saw swords flash red in the torchlight, saw breastplates crumple and helmets battered in. Sloan was shouting for the Humanites to scatter so that he and Van Voss could use their guns but there was no place to scatter, no refuge from those terrible hoofs.

Sloan got in two careful shots, Van Voss one, and horses fell and kicked and killed as they died. The others plunged over their bodies and went on with flying heels. Blood crawled on the floor.

The Humanites fled along the only way that was open to them, back into the palace, and they swept Sloan and Van Voss with them.

Hatha and his Clan-brothers pressed them, trampling the stragglers. Then the black stallion wheeled with a neighing cry and came galloping on bloodstained hoofs back out the broad doorway with the others following him.

"Back to the forest, my brothers! Back to Vruun!"

The Hoofed Ones thundered down the dark winding forest-avenue. Nelson and Tark ran beside them and, overhead, the eagle soared, and where men of Anshan tried to stand against them they were trampled down. Out across the moonlit plain they went and up into the edge of the forest where Nsharra was waiting for them.

Before she could ask the question Tark told her.

"Barin is dead."

She said nothing, but Nelson saw that she stood quite fixed and still.

Tark's thought came roughly. "There is no time to mourn now! At dawn, our enemies come with fire for the forest!"

"Fire?" That struck Nsharra out of her frozen grief as no other thing could have done. "But that is death for the Clans?"

"Unless we warn them in time!" Tark thought swiftly. "Ei must spread the word, while we speed to Vruun."

NSHARRA looked at the wolf that was Eric Nelson, standing there rocking with exhaustion.

Nelson heard her swift question. "Tark, what of him?"

"He failed to save Barin and he goes back to Vruun as the Guardian ordered," Tark answered grimly. "With us."

"He fought the other outlanders—tried to kill them when he learned their crime!" Ei put in swiftly. "He is not one of them now."

"I think you speak truth, Winged One," retorted the wolf. "Yet the Guardian's word holds. He goes back to Vruun for judgment."

"I am willing," Nelson told them dully. "I can go nowhere else than Vruun."

He had known that from the first. Had known that, even if he failed to redeem his own human body, he must go back to it because he would rather die in that body than live in another shape.

Nsharra leaped onto Hatha's back. "We go now and we will spread the warning as we go."

They started through the forest, Nelson loping with Tark behind the great stallion, Ei winging fast and far ahead of them. And all through the dark forest, Nelson heard the warning ahead of them, spreading, spreading, across the river, up the hills.

Run! Run, Clan-brothers! At dawn the forest burns!

Fear was in the valley this night. Nelson could smell it on the wind. Already, the Clans were beginning to move away from the shelter of the forest that had become a trap.

Northward to Vruun, eagles winging black against the stars, tigers running velvet-pawed, the packs of the Hairy Ones voicing the wailing cry of danger again and again, the horses crashing like driven bucks over the deadfalls.

At dawn, the forest burns!

Nelson felt even his rangy wolf-body sag with utter exhaustion by the time dawn came. They had reached the ridge above Vruun and the wind brought the first sharp taint of smoke over the forest to them now.

Hatha lifted his head and snuffed the air and, as he too breathed the faint cruel smell, Nelson again felt a primal terror.

Hatha said, "It has begun."

To Nelson it seemed half an eternity later before they had covered those last miles into Vruun. He saw the city through a red blur of utter weariness. He stumbled as he went with the others through the winding forest-ways whose green tide lapped the shimmering glass bubble-domes and towers.

Warning had come ahead of them to Vruun, eagle-winged. Fear seethed through the strange fraternity of men and beasts in the streets and woods-ways. And southward, a haze thickened and rose against the sun and turned it to a disk of ugly copper.

Nelson turned blindly with the others into the Hall of Clans. He followed them into the pale, shimmering hall where Kree was waiting. They were all there now, the Clan-leaders. And Eric Nelson, in the body of Asha the wolf, went heavily across the wide room to stand before the Guardian.

"Your son is dead," he told the Guardian.

Kree stood straight and tall in his dark mantle, his gaze somber as he looked down at Nelson.

"Then you have failed, outlander. But your judgment can come later for now the doom you helped bring here is sweeping toward us."

Yes, I helped bring that doom to L'Lan and the Brotherhood, he thought. *I helped bring it, the death that is coming.*

"Confine him until we judge him," Nelson heard Kree order. He heard the thought only vaguely for his mind was too drunk with fatigue to function. He was hardly aware of walking unsteadily in the direction that guards pointed out with their swords, through corridors, through a door—

It was a green-glass walled chamber that they locked him into. Nelson, his mind darkening, stretched his wolf-body on the cool floor and sank into an abyss of sleep.

CHAPTER XV

The Wrath of the Clans

NELSON dreamed strangely in his stuporous sleep, dreams of thought-voices that his mind could hear, of forms moving around him, of, finally, a stunning, thunderous wave of force that rolled upon him.

He was overwhelmed by it, carried by it over the sheer brink of the world. He was falling into an awesome, howling gulf that was outside space and time, was falling, falling—

A strange shock stopped his fall. And then he became dimly aware that sensation was returning to him, that he was awaking.

"Is all well with you, Asha?" Nelson heard a thought-voice ask.

"All is well—and I am glad to have awaked from my sleep!" He heard the eager answering thought. That was strange. The question had been answered by Asha, yet *he* was Asha the wolf—at least he dwelt in the wolf's body.

Or did he?

Nelson suddenly realized that half his sense-perceptions were gone, that he could no longer scent anything at all. His body felt different. Not the tight, compact wolf-body to which he'd grown accustomed, but a long, gangling, awkward body—

Nelson, with an inarticulate cry, wrenched his eyelids open. But he knew what he would see before he looked down at himself. His hoarse wordless cry had been no wolf's howl but a human cry.

He looked down at the length of his own

body again, sprawling in its dusty khaki uniform on a padded cot, still wearing its thought-crown. He moved arms and legs and they responded.

"I'm back," he whispered thickly.

"Yes," said a breathless voice. "You are back, Eric Nelson!"

He knew it for Nsharra's voice and he turned to look for her and looked full into the face of Asha the wolf. They lay side by side on two narrow cots—the wolf whose mind had slept so that a man could occupy his body—and the man.

Asha's body was dusty now, his hair matted with dried blood from wounds, his feet sore and bleeding. But his bright green eyes looked intelligently into Nelson's face. Nelson turned and looked up. Kree stood behind the cots, beside the big platinum mind-transference machine of the ancients.

"You brought me back into my own body while I slept?" Nelson said hoarsely.

"Yes," said Kree. "The force of the ancients stunned you in sleep so that you did not wake."

Nelson sat up. He felt strong, rested, fresh—and realized it was because his human body had lain here in coma for so long. Yet his human body now felt *strange*. He felt blinded and deafened by his loss of scent, felt slow, clumsy, awkward.

He sat up and saw that Nsharra stood at the foot of his cot. And that the four leaders of the great Clans were here—Tark and Hatha, the tiger and Ei. They were watching him.

"Death and danger walk toward Vruun on swift feet of flame," Kree was saying somberly. "Little time was left to give Asha back his body and return you to *your* body for judgment."

For judgment? That was why they had returned him to his humanity as doom drew close to Vrunn? Then the time had come.

Nelson stood up and faced them all. "I am ready," he said heavily.

"Tark and Ei have told us how you fought to save Barin—how you fought your friends," said Kree.

"They were not my friends, save one who is dead now," Nelson answered heavily. "I did not know, though, they were butchers."

"It seems you have learned much you did not know, outlander," said Kree. "You know now what it will be like for the Clans if the Humanites break the Brotherhood."

"Yes, I know that now," answered Eric Nelson sickly.

Free children of the forest, hunted and slain and enslaved as in the outer world! Swift sentient folk of the Clans, crushed beneath a stupid human tyranny! He deserved what was coming—

"You are free to leave L'Lan," said Kree.

Nelson stared, incredulous. "You're not going to kill me for what I've helped to do?"

Kree shook his head. "By your work last night, you redeemed the crime that you committed in ignorance. You can go."

Nelson looked at the Guardian, then around the watching leaders of the Clans.

"But I want to *stay!*" he cried. "I want to help you save the Brotherhood, to undo what I helped do here!"

Nsharra cried eagerly to her father, "Give him the chance! He will be loyal to us, I know!"

"He will be loyal," Tark's thought agreed. "And he knows the ways and weapons of the outlanders."

KREE'S eyes searched Nelson's face, seemed to be searching his soul. Finally the Guardian spoke.

"So be it, outlander. Your help can be valuable in this hour of peril." He swung toward the others. "Clan-leaders, let the word run through all your Clans that *this* outlander fights on our side!"

"We shall see how he fights," growled the thought of Quorr the tiger.

Nelson felt the uplift of a queer buoyancy, as though an oppressive weight had been lifted from him. He knew, now. He knew that this Brotherhood that had at first seemed to his outer-world eyes so unnatural and alien was worth all sacrifices to preserve. He had learned that in the body of Asha the wolf.

And he felt strangely happy. For ten years he had fought the purposeless battles of warlords, first for adventure and then because he had no other profession. But this last battle was to be for a cause that he thought worth all he had to give.

Kree, as the Clan-leaders hurried out, led Nelson to a window that looked southward over Vruun.

"The hour comes fast upon us, outlander!"

Nelson was appalled by the spectacle. He realized now that hours had passed, for the sun was westering in a bloody, smoky murk. The whole southern sky was a wall of black smoke laced with livid flame—a wall that

marched toward Vruun and was but a few miles distant. Only the forests west of the river were burning, but they were burning from the river to the western hills.

"That fire will be here in a few hours and Sloan and Van Voss and the Humanites will come after it!" Nelson exclaimed.

Kree nodded. "But we hope to stop it. The men of Vruun have labored all day to cut a fire-break from the river to the western hills."

"No mere fire-break will stop that!" Nelson told him emphatically. "It will jump it. You've got to start a backfire."

"Use fire as a defense against fire?" Kree looked worried. "The Clans would not like it. They hate all fire."

"Either that or the blaze will come into Vrunn tonight!" Nelson warned.

Kree said reluctantly, "I will go with you and give the order."

As they turned, Nelson found Nsharra handing two heavy service pistols to him. He recognized them as his own and Lefty's.

"Less than twenty shots," he muttered, as he belted on the guns. "And Sloan and Van Voss will have submachine-guns and will have trained some of the Humanites to use grenades."

"But your experience of war will be valuable to us," Kree told him. "We know little of war in L'Lan. Our swords have only been used at long intervals to repel outland tribes who sought to enter."

"I go with you, father!" cried Nsharra, her eyes dark and stormy with excitement.

Kree shook his head. "Nsharra, if aught befalls me, you alone remain to rally the Brotherhood. You must remain in Vruun."

Eric Nelson went out of the Hall of Clans with the Guardian into a thickening, ominous dusk. Smoke was rolling ever more densely from the south, blotting out the sunset. The air was bitter with it.

Tark ran up to them, the Hairy One's eyes blazing. "The fighters of the Clans are already on their way in the forest! Two of the Hoofed Ones wait for you!"

Nelson leaped on the back of one of the excited horses as Kree too mounted. They rode southward out of Vruun.

The sun had gone down behind smoke-veils as though afraid, and darkness was thickening westward. But southward it was like a dreadful new dawn over the forest, the whole sky there blood-red, immense.

Nelson, as he rode with Kree along a red-lit forest aisle beside the wide, dark-flowing river, heard the Clans moving through the forest with them, and heard their thought-cry.

Gather, O ye of the Brotherhood! Gather to the south, my brothers, for soon we fight —and die!

The woods were full of running shadows. Shaking red light fell on gray backs and striped backs and struck fire from eyes that were already like blown coals in the darkness and shone white on gleaming, snicking teeth.

The ground shook to the trampling thunder of hoofs as Hatha's Clan went by, great stallions, their loose manes whipped like banners on the wind of their going. Some of them bore men of Vruun, armed for battle. And above the tree-tops in the bloody glare, the wide-winged eagles looped and swung.

There rose the terrific call of Tark beside them and it was answered. A tiger roared and another, sending their deep rolling coughs to echo from the hillsides. And the sons of Hatha lifted their wild neighing on the night.

Roll call! Roll call of the Clans!

Nelson's throat contracted and the warrior in him was shaken by a strange emotion. He heard the thought-cry of a lithe gray wolf-shape that ran in close to Tark and Kree and himself.

"Outlander, we go together this time! Good hunting!"

WITH a weird feeling, Nelson recognized that running wolf-shape as the one which for a time had been his own.

"Good hunting, Asha!"

They came to the fire-break that the men of Vruun had labored all day to hew across the forest, and Nelson groaned inwardly.

This ragged hundred-foot lane, cut at such labor from the woods, would never stop the cyclone of flame raging up from the south.

"We must start our backfire going from the south side of this lane, and keep it from jumping back across!" he told Kree. "And there's little time!"

The whole night a few miles ahead was now a sky-high chaos of smoke and flame. The red glare lit the hosts of human and beast warriors now pouring here from the north.

"Fire to stop fire, my brothers!" Kree's thought called, from his steed. "It must be your task to prevent it from jumping back."

They did not like it, Nelson saw. The blood-mad excitement of the Clans checked briefly with something that was close to fear. But they had the courage to face what was to them the supremely dreaded thing.

"Fire to stop fire!" flared Tark. "Let it begin!"

Nelson had dismounted. Now he hastily supervised the men Kree deputed to the task of starting the back-fire. Their torches kindled the dry brush like tinder all along the southern edge of their fire-lane. Dry cedar and fir blazed up and the edge of the lane became a new wall of fire moving back south toward that mightier oncoming wall.

But moving slowly, slowly! The wind was against them, Nelson realized. Blazing leaves and twigs began to whirl across the lane, to dance with joyous wickedness over the narrow gap.

"Stamp the fire-sparks out where they fall!" Hatha's thought called. "Help the man-Clan, Hoofed Ones!"

Nelson, half stifled by smoke, sweating, labored with the men of Vruun and the Hoofed Ones, beating out each dangerous spark. And Kree sat his mount in the shaking red glow, his mind reaching out to steady the excited, jumpy Clans.

"Wait, brothers! Soon our fire will have conquered the fire of our enemies and then we shall seek them out!"

Nelson, laboring with the men of Vruun to stamp out the sparks that came across, felt that the south wind was a living thing, a malignant demon that delighted in hurling fire across the gap.

Yet he saw, through smoke-stung, half-blinded eyes, that the backfire was steadily if slowly creeping south. Soon it would have scorched a belt across which the giant flame-storm could not leap.

And then with a harsh, screaming cry, Ei winged down through the rolling smoke and sparks.

"The Humanites and the two outlanders come down the river, floating upon rafts!" cried the eagle's thought. "They are swinging in to land behind you!"

Appalled, Eric Nelson suddenly realized that that *would* be Nick Sloan's strategy, that it was the only possible strategy for him. Rafts that would carry the Humanite warriors would have been simple to build and with them the river became a safe highway to Vruun for Sloan and his forces, a safe road behind and past the fire-storm.

And Sloan, seeing them setting their back-fire here, *would* try to swing around and catch them from behind, trap them between his forces and their fire.

"To the river!" Nelson cried. "If they land behind us we're lost! Ei, lead the way!"

"This way, Clan-brothers!" flashed the eagle's thought as he soared up again on thunderous wings.

Nelson had leaped on Hatha's back. Riding beside Kree back through the red-lit forest toward the river-edge, he sensed the wild relief of the Clans pouring to the fight around him.

Fire they hated, inaction they hated but now at last their chance to come to grips with the destroyers had come. Beasts and mounted men, they crashed through brush and trees to the edge of the red-lit river just as the first of a score of long crude rafts, loaded with warriors, was poled ashore. Nelson saw that some of the Humanites carried webbing sacks of grenades.

He shouted, "Charge them! Rush them in the shallows! You Hoofed Ones—ride them down!"

Hatha laid his ears back and ran straight for the water. Nelson clung to his mane, his gun out, firing. Behind him, in a terrible resistless rush, the Clans swept into battle and even the red thundering flowers of the grenades could not stop them.

IN THE brush of the banks, on the rocky shore, in the water, men and beasts crashed together, screamed and died, and the river was the color of blood under the flame-lit sky.

Squealing, kicking, plunging, Hatha raged through the thick of the fight and took Nelson with him. Nelson caught a glimpse of Sloan and Van Voss, on rafts out in the river, willing to let Shan Kar's men bear the brunt of the fight. They fondled submachine-guns but could not use them, the two forces were so entangled.

The men of Vruun rode up and down the beaches, their swords flashing, and where their horses were killed under them they fought on foot, locked breast to breast with their erstwhile brothers of Anshan.

Great striped bodies leaped and rolled and clawed and everywhere the gray wolves ran, slashing, slaying. Eagles swooped and struck their talons home. Bodies fell on the stones and lay heaped in the shallows and the Clans and the men of Anshan fought on over them.

the horses' hoofs ringing on the mail of the fallen men.

"*Hai-ooo!*" came the blood-chilling killing-cry of Tark, a gray demon gone mad with battle.

Nelson, clinging to Hatha's back as the stallion crashed and whirled in the crazy fight, glimpsed a white-faced Humanite warrior stabbing upward with his sword.

He shot, and glimpsed the man's face drive in. But another Humanite had seized the instant to rush in at him, sword gleaming— A gray thunderbolt flew from behind Nelson at the new attacker, aiming for the throat.

"Asha, look out!" Nelson sent his warning thought as he saw the dog-wolf's staggering opponent drop sword and whip out a dagger.

Even as he flung himself off Hatha into the shallow water to help he saw the dagger rip the dog-wolf's ribs. And then the Humanite sprawled in the water, his throat a pumping red gash.

Asha staggered, slipped. Fading flare of green eyes shone up at Nelson as he reached the wolf. He heard the dying thought

"Good hunting, broth—"

"They flee!" came the wild, raging thought-cry of Quorr. "Kill, before they escape!"

The Humanites, what was left of those who had landed, were wildly pushing their rafts back into the river, back into the deeper water.

Nelson heard Nick Sloan's cool sharp voice cut in across the din, from the rafts farther out.

"Pull back! That's enough!"

The fighters of the Clans, blood-mad, were balked, could not follow into that deeper water. But as the fight momentarily slackened thus, past Nelson pushed Kree.

The Guardian stood outlined in the suddenly brighter glow of distant firelight, his hand raised as his voice rolled out onto the river.

"Men of Anshan, will you destroy all L'Lan in blood and fire? Wrath of the ancients, wrath of the Cavern, fall upon you if you follow this road farther!"

"Kree, get back!" yelled Nelson, leaping forward.

He was too late. The burst of submachine-gun fire that came from out there on the rafts was brutally, contemptuously short. Kree clutched his breast and went down in the water. And Nelson heard Nick Sloan's voice from out there.

"Good shooting, Piet!"

A mad cry, a cry that was a thought and a bowl and a scream of fury, went through the Clans.

"The Guardian is slain!"

Nelson, turning to drag Kree's body ashore, felt his heart check as he saw why the firelight was suddenly brighter now. The forest *between* them and their fire-break was a wall of flame, marching southward toward them.

"Our backfire has jumped the gap while we fought here!" he cried. "We can't stop it now—Vruun is doomed!"

CHAPTER XVI

The Cavern of Creation

NELSON now realized with tragic clarity the simple and effective strategy that Nick Sloan had used. Seeing them building a defense against the sweep of fire, Sloan had callously sent Humanite warriors in to a landing he knew could not succeed to draw them away from their fight against the flames.

And the strategy had worked. The fire had overrun their line of defense and was now moving on the wings of the wind toward Vruun.

"We can't hold that fire now!" Nelson cried. "It will be into Vruun in an hour. Pull back!"

Retreat was a lesson the Clans had never learned. Wild with battle-excitement, they would have refused to retreat now had it not been for the wall of flame sweeping toward them.

Tark sent out his thought-cry. "Back to Vruun, Clan-brothers! We must get all out of the city before the fire reaches it!"

From out in the river a submachine-gun started hammering at them as they drew back from the water.

A stallion crashed down, a tiger screamed in rage and pain. Nelson, having lifted Kree's body across the back of Hatha, led the way through the forest.

Great scorching winds howled and whooped about them and flung blinding smoke to impede their way. The steady crackling of the sky-high wall of flame behind

them had grown to an ominous roar.

Nelson felt rage and hatred equal to those of the Clans about him as he stumbled with them through the smoke toward Vruun. He knew that Nick Sloan would coolly bring his forces on down the river just behind the fire, following it in complete safety. And Sloan could wait, smiling, while the people of Vruun died amid the flaming trees.

"Hurry!" cried Nelson. "Hurry!"

The southern edges of the city were crowded. All those who had been left behind had come there to watch the doom that rolled toward them down the reddened sky—the females, the old, the very young. The winding forest-avenues were choked with them.

As the returning Clans swept into Vruun, scorched and bloody and raging with defeat, from all sides the anxious question came.

"What word? Is the fire stopped?"

Then they saw Hatha and the burden he carried and it seemed to Nelson that the whole city gave one great cry of woe and was silent. Nsharra was waiting for them outside the Hall of Clans, and Nelson saw from her face that word of Kree's death had reached her.

She flung her mantle on the grass. She said to Nelson, "Lay my father here under the trees."

As he did so, he heard the thought of the Clan-leaders to Nsharra. "You inherit the Guardianship now!"

She took the weight of duty on her slim shoulders. "What is the word?"

Nelson told her rapidly. "You must get every living thing out of Vruun," he finished. "The fire will be in these forest-streets in less than an hour."

Nsharra showed no sign of fear. She turned to the leaders.

"Lead your Clans to the northern hills, up beneath the mountains!"

Quorr growled. "Let the females and the young go. We stay to fight!"

"Fight what?" Nelson demanded. "The flames?"

He whirled and pointed to the southern sky. Crimson and cruel it lowered over them and already the flickering glare was lighting the streets of Vruun.

"Will your Clan pull that down with their claws, Quorr?"

Tark's thought was furious. "But to run away like cubs, with our tails between our legs—!"

"So that you'll live to fight later!" Nelson told him. "When the ashes cool the Clans can come down from the hills and attack the Humanites again!"

"He is right, Tark!" Nsharra supported. "Go now and spread the word!"

Nelson heard the cry go out by voice and thought. "North to the hills and tarry not, my brothers!"

And they went, out through the streets of the doomed city under the reddened sky.

MOTHERS drove their children ahead of them—wolf-cub and tiger-cub and human. Mares with their foals went by. Broad pinions of the Winged Ones beat northward through the fiery gloom. Moving out, moving out, even as the Clans had fled from the forest! And fear went with them on the bitter air and the eyries were empty save for the drifting smoke.

Watching this, Eric Nelson came to a desperate decision. He told Nsharra, "Sloan and Van Voss are the backbone of the whole Humanite campaign. If I could get those two and their weapons out of the way the Brotherhood would have a fighting chance later on!"

She looked at him, white-faced. "I know what you are thinking—that you must stop them because *you* helped bring them here!"

Nelson did not deny it.

"But it's impossible!" she cried. "You can't get near them. They won't come on until the fire has swept us out of Vruun and out of the forest!"

Nelson said swiftly, "But when the fire has cleared the way for him Sloan will make for the Cavern of Creation! I know him—it's the platinum there he's after, first and last."

He caught her arm. "You must show me how to get into the Cavern, Nsharra! I'll wait there for them—I've a few bullets left and those two won't get out again if I can help it!"

Nsharra looked at him with wide dark eyes. Then she said, "Come, I'll show you the way."

The streets, the forest ways, were almost empty now. The last stragglers were disappearing northward through the trees. It was none too soon. Ash was falling like snow and the wind was hot. The Clan-leaders came racing back, their eyes burning with the anger and the shame of flight. Hatha had brought a mount for Nelson.

"Is the city cleared?" Nsharra cried.

Tark's quick thought answered. "It is cleared."

"Then it is time to go!"

She looked for a moment at her father, stretched out as though in sleep upon the dark mantle, his head pillowed on the grass.

"Leave him here in his city," she said.

She turned and sprang to Hatha's back. Nelson also mounted, and they galloped northward out of Vruun after the Clans. Smoke coiled thick among the trees, lit by the strange red glow. Ash fell more heavily and the wind brought burning showers of sparks.

Looking back minutes later, Nsharra cried, "The city burns!"

Nelson looked back also and saw the flames leaping triumphant behind them. They flared in great twisting banners from the tree-tops, turning the forest ways into red rivers of fire that flowed northward. The crest of that fiery flood raced after the fugitives, roaring, dancing, eating the trees as it pursued.

"Faster or we'll be trapped!" Nelson shouted.

He saw how the glassy bubble-roofs back there had turned smoky red as the flames washed over them. They did not burn or crack but they glowed in the terrible heat, the minarets throwing back the crimson glare.

Choking, coughing, burned by flying sparks, Nelson and Nsharra and the Clan-leaders raced ahead of the leaping flames. Nelson clung desperately to his mount as the Hoofed One smashed through brush, leaped dry gullies, bucked and scrambled over fallen trees. He could barely see the others in the smoke.

They burst out of the woods onto the open plain that rose ahead of them to the barren foothills. Another spurt, another staggering burst of speed and they were safe. The fire flared to the edge of the woods and checked.

Now, close above them, Nelson saw the throbbing eye of the Cavern of Creation, pulsing with mysterious light. The Clans were moving up on either side of that coldly flaring orifice, on up into the higher bare hills.

On a flat ledge just outside the glowing mouth of the Cavern, Nelson stopped and dismounted. Nsharra did likewise.

She told the four leaders, "Nelson and I go into the Cavern! You lead your Clans on to safety."

Nelson cried, "No! You're not to stay in there with me, Nsharra—only to show me the way!"

"I am Guardian now," Nsharra said firmly. "It is my duty and my right to go with you."

He realized from her tone that argument would not sway her. And there was no time for argument. Time was running out.

"I go also!" Tark's thought cried and the other leaders echoed him.

"No!" Nsharra denied. "You also have your duty—to lead your Clans to safety."

Wolf and tiger, horse and eagle, wavered, irresolute. Then, as Nsharra repeated her command, they unwillingly went on into the darkness of the upper slopes.

Nelson uttered an exclamation. He had turned to look back, and now he pointed downward. By the glaring light, they could see Nick Sloan's rafts coming down the blood-red river past the blazing city.

"They'll be up here soon," he said edgedly. "Nsharra, there's still time for you to get away!"

"I will show you the safe way into the Cavern, now," she answered. "But I am its Guardian and I will not leave it!"

He turned with her toward that great mouth of cold, quivering light. Deliberately, Nsharra led the way into it.

JUST inside the entrance she paused. Nelson looked about. Where the light outside had been red and hot, here it was a cool glow like uncanny moonlight.

The cavity was huge and circular, running back into the hill. Nelson guessed it to be eighty feet high. A hundred feet from where they stood yawned a deep cleft that ran across the cavern floor, and it was from here that the cold light came—a terrific blaze of white radiation flung upward out of the cleft.

Nelson began to see things that astounded him even more than his first sight of Vruun and Anshan.

Great circular ribs of metal, massive girders dim in the lofty gloom, seemed to support the roof and sides of the cavern. He made out the shapes of metal tubes, gigantic things, crumpled and twisted as though by blasting force, that ran along the walls into the unguessable shadowy spaces farther in.

His brain began to reel with impossible conjectures. Stepping forward toward the cleft, he glimpsed a glowing white mass that lay deep down at the bottom of the crevice.

Nsharra drew him back. "Do not go too close to the cold fire—its light can blast and kill!"

"Radioactive!" Nelson muttered incredulously. "A radioactive chemical mass of some sort that's eaten its way into the floor."

Very effectively, that moat of death had barred all entrance into the unguessable farther depths of the Cavern.

He looked up along the wall above the cleft and made out vast twisted cylinders, their metal sides burst and gaping. There was no mistaking what those cylinders were. They were huge tanks.

Had the radioactive mass spilled from those shattered tanks? It seemed obvious and yet—

Nsharra led him to the end of the mass of giant tubes that ran along the walls back to the farther depths of the Cavern. The tubes were all of six feet in diameter, made of unfamiliar metal, massive and thick. He tried to picture them as they must have been once and the picture staggered his mind with suggestions that were pure madness.

Nsharra said, "Most of these strange tunnels are broken. But one of them leads safely over the cleft of cold fire. It is the secret way, found long ago by a Guardian and told only to his successors."

She climbed into the flared ripped end of one of the giant tubes, motioning him to follow. He did so, using his pocket light. The inner wall of the tube was pitted and scored, the metal burned. Yes, *burned*, like a charred log. And yet it seemed amazingly tough metal. It acted as a shield against the deadly radiation they were crossing.

Numbly Nelson wondered what terrible force had ripped through these giant tubes to scar them so.

Ahead of him, Nsharra came to a place where the tube twisted upon itself. He scrambled with her around the turn. Then, suddenly, he snapped off his light and whispered quickly to her.

"Silence!"

They crouched and listened, and Nelson heard plainly this time the sound that had warned him—a sound of something slipping and scrambling behind them in the tube, something straining to overtake them.

He had his gun out and ready when Tark's thought came to them. "Where man can go wolf can go! And where Nsharra goes this wolf goes also!"

Nelson relaxed and swore. Tark scrambled toward them, digging his claws into the pitted metal.

"Too late for anger now," he thought to Nsharra. "The outlanders and Shan Kar's men have already landed." He added with a wolfish shrug, "And anyway my Clan is safe now."

Nsharra's hand briefly touched the massive hairy head, but she did not speak. They went on for what seemed a long time in the tube. Then it debouched into a round gigantic metal chamber that looked to Nelson very like part of a turbine—a turbine built by giants for some unguessable purpose.

"Giant tubes that *could* be jet-tubes!" he said half aloud in a stunned voice. "This colossal turbine—and the radioactive chemical from the tanks, that could be fuel—"

"Come," said Nsharra and he followed her, the wolf keeping close to them as though awed by this forbidden place.

As they stepped out of the shattered turbine, well beyond the deadly cleft, Nelson could look into the shadowy farther spaces of the Cavern that previously the cold radiance had hidden from him.

He was not really surprised at what he saw. Shocked, stunned, awed, but not really surprised. Before him stretched the Cavern, vast, incredible, shadows glooming thicker as the eye went back into it.

And its half-seen, half-guessed shape was the shape of a torpedo, tapering from blunt stern to slender point. A sharp, clean point to cleave the air, to cleave, perhaps, the vast gulfs where there was no air, where only the stars rubbed shoulders with eternity!

He saw the great arching ribs, the looming platinum machinery that had no meaning for him because there had never been anything like it on Earth. Machines, and panels, that bore gauges and dials marked in strange symbols. And the alien but unmistakable assembly of jet-tubes, the great turbine-engines that once had driven thunderously—

Nelson spoke, and the sound of his own voice was echoing and strange in that vast dead vault of metal.

"A ship," he whispered. "The Cavern is a giant ship, that crashed here heaven alone knows how long ago. A *space* ship, that came to Earth and fell and was buried here by the silt of ages."

The deadly danger of the imminent crisis with Sloan was almost forgotten in Nelson's stupefied wonder. He moved slowly forward deeper into the shadowy ship, looking

up at the huge broken machines.

Was this the colossal secret of the valley of L'Lan? Those ancients whose subtle science had made the thought-crowns and the mind-transferrer—were they from another world, long, long ago? He stepped between two thick platinum pillars, on each of which was mounted a big quartz sphere. And suddenly, as though it came from the depthless gulfs of time, a cool, vast alien mind spoke to his.

The words, the thoughts, rang through his brain with a throbbing power that shook the whole fabric of his mind.

"You who shall come after us, take warning!"

CHAPTER XVII

The Day of the Brotherhood

NELSON stopped, stricken by a freezing awe that he had never felt before. It was not the mere fact of the thought-voice speaking in his mind that stupefied him. He was too accustomed to that, by now.

It was the power and the quality of this new mental voice. It had in it the vibrations of a mind of range and magnitude beyond his imagination. It was alien, yet had a tantalizing echo of familiarity.

"Take warning!"

Nsharra's voice broke the spell. She had stepped quickly with Tark to his side as he stood frozen between the platinum pillars.

"It is the voice of the ancients of the Cavern, Eric Nelson! Their voice, speaking from the dim past, from *those!"* She pointed at the great, glittering quartz spheres atop the two platinum pillars.

"Each time one steps between these pillars, their mind speaks—always the same. My father and all the Guardians before him knew it."

Nelson began dimly to understand. The mental voice he heard was a record—not a sonic record but a telepathic one imprinted somehow in those quartz spheres and reproduced to all who came between them.

How was it done? How could thought be recorded and reproduced? He did not know that, would never know. But that the ancients had been masters of telepathic science, his experience with the thought-crowns and the mind-transferrer proved.

And now, after a pregnant pause, that cool passionless voice was speaking on in his mind.

"Take warning not lightly to unchain the forces and powers within this ship should, you learn to master them! Take warning to let no unscruplous or ignorant ones even *know* of these powers! Take warning from our own tragic fate!

"We who speak to you were not like you in body. We were not of this world of yours. Upon a world far out in the starry universe we were born and developed in intelligence and grew to great knowledge and power.

"Our world was a world of beauty, our cities were cities of laughter and light. But we aspired too high, we dreamed too greatly of conquering all nature and, finally, we unloosed powers that we could not chain again and that began to destroy our world.

"So we built this star-ship, and in it the last remnants of our race went out from our dying planet into the stars to find another world. We searched star-system after star-system without finding a world that fitted us—until at last a disastrous accident in space crippled our star-ship as it neared this System.

"Our crippled ship crashed upon this planet, in this valley. It could never fly again. And we could not build another ship for we were dying. This world was wrong for us, its atmosphere and chemical composition poisoned us and that poison in our bodies left us not long to live.

"We knew that we were doomed. Yet we could not let all the hard-won intelligence and knowledge of our race thus perish! Therefore we determined that, though our bodies were dying, our minds should continue to live upon this planet.

"They could only do so, if we transferred our minds into the bodies of creatures native to this world. Only the higher creatures could house our minds. So we picked five different species from among them, the ape and the tiger and the horse and the wolf and eagle.

"At least one of those differing species, we hoped, would survive even if the others perished. So we took members of those clans and we so altered their brain-structure as to give them the power of telepathic speech and so altered their genes as to make the change in them hereditary. Then we transferred our minds into their bodies.

"Now that has been done. We wear the new bodies of the five Clans and our old bodies are dead. We go out now from this wrecked ship to begin again the struggle against nature on this planet.

"We know that a dark time is coming! We know that the children of our new bodies will not inherit all our capacity of mind, that our knowledge and wisdom will slip from their memories and be largely forgotten.

"But some day, in ages to come, some at least of the five species will slowly develop to intelligence approximating our own. Then they will understand the relics of our power left in this ship.

"When that time comes, take warning! Take warning not to loose doom upon yourself as we did upon our world! Remember always the tragedy of us, your star-born ancestors of long ago!"

Eric Nelson, stunned and incredulous, felt the strong vibration of thought die away in his mind. He stepped back in awe from between the platinum pillars, with Tark and Nsharra.

"Good Lord!" Nelson husked. "That incredible story—it means that the myth of the Cavern of Creation is *true!*"

Yes, it was true, that fantastic legend to which he had not given even second thought, at which even the Humanites had scoffed!

OUT of this cavern—this cavern that was a buried starship of long ago—*had* come the first intelligence on Earth! Intelligence that had embodied itself in the five great clans of which man was but one.

"The Clans and men were really equal, from the first!" he whispered. "In Brotherhood from the first! And then some of the human Clan, leaving this valley and spreading out over Earth—"

The riddle that had mystified anthropologists, the riddle of man's enigmatic origin in Central Asia, was solved at last. Long ago ancient and alien beings whose physical nature he might never know had transferred their minds into the bodies of the five species of Earthly animals. Had done that with machines which still survived, one of which Kree had used so weirdly upon himself!

And of the five Clans originally in this valley, it was the man-Clan that had gone out and subdued the rest of the wild earth and its animals, had made itself tyrannical master of the unthinking brutes outside the valley.

And this valley L'lan, where the five Clans were still equal in intelligence and where the Brotherhood still held true, had been forgotten by the conquering human hosts in the outer would! Nelson felt shaken by the revelation. He looked with widened eyes around the vast gloom, the towering platinum machines.

"To think of the powers, the knowledge, that have been hidden here for ages!"

"It is why this cavern is a forbidden place," said Nsharra. "It is why my father could not let any enter here to hear these records that *prove* the origin of the Brotherhood is no myth!"

Of a sudden Tark whirled and his thought came swiftly to Nelson and the girl. "They come now from outside, into the Cavern!"

Nelson swung around, gripping his gun. He could not see the entrance of the Cavern—the shaking curtain of radiance from the cleft of cold fire barred his gaze.

Yet he trusted the wolf's instincts. He asked quickly, "How many, Tark?"

"But four," the wolf's thought answered. "The two outlanders, and Shan Kar and Holk of the Humanites."

"The other Humanites would fear to enter!" Nsharra exclaimed, her eyes blazing.

"It gives us a better chance," Nelson rasped. "Nsharra, stay back here in the shadows. I'm going to try to get them as they come through that tube."

He sprang forward and found Tark running beside him. "It was for this fight that I came with you, outlander! I owe a blood-debt!"

They hastened into the shadowy interior of the huge wrecked turbine, to the end of the giant tube. Nelson crouched there, gun in hand, his other hand restraining the tense hairy body of Tark.

He had only half a clip left in his gun and he knew he must wait until Sloan and the others came past the twist in the tube. He had to make sure.

He heard the slipping, scrambling sounds of their progress through the tube and he felt Tark tauten beside him.

"Not yet!" Nelson told himself, sweating. "Not yet—"

The scuffling of feet was louder, much louder. They had surely come around the twist in the tube by now.

But he had to be sure! He waited seconds longer, waited when he felt sure they were but yards away from him in the dark tube.

Then Nelson emptied his pistol straight

down the tube.

"Piet, hold on!" yelled a muffled voice in the tube as the thunderous echoes died.

Nelson had heard his bullets whining off metal. He knew then that he had failed, that the amplification of sound in the tube had tricked him into firing too soon.

A whisper came down the tube to him. "Give him—"

Then, a metallic something came bumping and rattling along the tube toward him.

"Grenade!" yelled Nelson. "Back, Tark!"

He and the wolf recoiled and leaped to escape from the turbine interior as the bumping, rattling thing came out of the tube. As they burst out of the turbine, a terrific explosion blammed behind them. Murderous bits of steel thudded into the turbine walls and a few that found openings whizzed over their heads.

Then Nelson heard the sharp rattle of submachine-gun fire, heard bullets ricocheting inside the huge turbine.

"I will not flee without killing!" flared Tark's thought. The wolf had turned, his hair bristling, great fangs gleaming.

"You wouldn't have a chance, Tark! They're clearing the way ahead with guns now! We may be able to evade them back in the shadows."

NELSON knew with a cold and terrible certainty how small that chance was. Sloan and the Dutchman would methodically hunt them down and he had not a shot left in his gun.

He and Tark ran between the platinum pillars of the thought-record, too swiftly to hear that mechanical epic message begin again. They reached Nsharra, back in the shadows.

"I failed," Nelson told her bitterly. "They will come on now. You should not have come here, Nsharra!"

She looked at him steadily, her face a white blur in the shadows. "I think L'Lan dies tonight and, if it does, I have no wish to live."

He took her into his arms. And it was then, as he held her, that Nick Sloan's calm voice came out to them.

Sloan and the other three had issued from the tube into the turbine but they had not come out of the turbine into the light of the cold fire. Nelson knew why. They were afraid he had more bullets.

"Nelson!" called the cool, hard voice. "Nelson, are you ready to quit making a fool of yourself and talk business?"

"Say what you have to say, Sloan," he called back.

The other's voice was almost a drawl. "Nelson, even though you got your body back you joined the losing side and I guess now you know it. You're trapped but I've no wish to rub you out. Give yourself up and I'll let you go free out of L'Lan."

Nelson thought swiftly. "You'd let the girl, and Tark, go with me?"

"Sure," came the quick answer. "Just toss your gun out and come out with hands raised."

Eric Nelson's mind was racing. He saw a vague possibility, a slender chance—

He put no faith whatever in Sloan's specious promise. He knew as completely as he could know anything that, when he walked out unarmed into the light, Sloan would give him a burst. But he had still one card in his hand that the others knew nothing of—a card that was a poor one, perhaps, but worth playing.

"I don't trust you, Sloan," he answered harshly. "But I'll give my gun to Shan Kar if *he* will guarantee our safety."

Instantly came Shan Kar's voice. "I will promise that, Nelson."

"Sure, and we'll stick by it," Sloan chimed in. "Won't we, Piet?"

"Then let Shan Kar come here and I'll surrender to him—but only to him," Nelson said.

There was a pause, a silence from the huge wrecked turbine. Then came the Humanite leader's voice.

"I am coming, Eric Nelson. Remember that if you kill me it will only seal your own doom."

Shan Kar came out into the light. He had sword in hand and his head was high, his stride confident as he came back toward the shadows. He glimpsed Nelson, standing with Nsharra and Tark in the shadows beyond the platinum pillars. He came toward them, his hand extended for the pistol that Nelson was holding out butt-foremost.

And then, as he stepped between the two quartz spheres on the pillars, Shan Kar stopped. A bewildered look came upon his face.

"What—what—?" he faltered, amazed.

Nelson knew. He knew that in Shan Kar's mind was now sounding that thought-record, that solemn message of the ancients.

"Take warning!"

Shan Kar stood rooted, listening—listening to that tremendous voice of the dim past repeating its saga of the coming of intelligence to Earth. And the Humanite's face grew strange.

Nelson knew when the record had ended. For Shan Kar moved forward again, hand still reaching out to take the empty gun. But he moved now like a man in a dream. And his eyes stared at them unseeingly.

"The word of the ancients!" he whispered. "But then it is true that the Brotherhood of the Clans is as old as man! Then the myths that we Humanites thought were lies are *true!*"

"They are true, Shan Kar," said Nsharra. "You would not believe my father because you did not want to believe him. And he could not bring you in here to hear because the ancients themselves prohibited that unscrupulous or ignorant men should enter here. But they are true!"

Shan Kar's olive, handsome face was pallid. "Then what we Humanites have believed, the natural dominance of man over the Clans—*that* is the lie!"

Nelson almost pitied the Humanite in this moment. Shan Kar had built a fanatic belief upon a basis that now was swept away.

He saw in the man's face the awful realization that he had brought fire and blood and death to L'Lan for a fanatic faith in human right to rule, that had no warrant in reality.

"You can pass that gun over to me," said Nick Sloan.

He and Van Voss, with Holk behind them, had come out of the turbine, their submachine-guns held breast-high. They stood not a dozen feet behind Shan Kar.

Shan Kar, wild-eyed, swung around to them. His voice was a hoarse cry. "We have done wrong! The legend of the Brotherhood is true! This killing must stop."

"The thing I dislike about working with fanatics," said Nick Sloan boredly, "is that you can't depend on them."

He pressed trigger as he spoke, briefly. The little burst of slugs spun Shan Kar around and flung him into the dust between the pillars.

SLOAN stepped forward, his eyes searching the shadows for Nelson and the girl. "Sorry it has to end this way, Nelson. You always were a fool in some ways. I hope—"

Nelson, almost dully, had watched him step forward. His last card, his hope of setting Shan Kar against Sloan by means of the thought-record, had failed him.

But had it? There was still a thin chance left if he could make it. Sloan stepped between the platinum pillars.

For a heart-beat, as the solemn thought-voice of the ancients automatically spoke to him. Sloan look startled. That was the moment when Nelson charged him.

The submachine-gun blasted over his head with a fiery breath and voice of thunder as he hit Sloan low and brought him down. They rolled together over the Cavern floor, toward the shaking curtain of cold light, Van Voss running after them to get in a burst that would not hit Sloan.

"This for Barin!" raged a wild wolf-thought and, as he rolled, Nelson glimpsed Tark's great body at the Dutchman's throat.

Sloan was battering him with his knee as he strove to tear loose his heavy gun and bang it against Nelson's skull. Abruptly then Sloan quit that and pulled the trigger. Flame and hot lead plowed along Nelson's forearm—and Sloan instantly wrenched free.

Sloan jumped to his feet, on the edge of the cleft of cold fire, standing magnified to giant proportions by the curtain of shaking light behind him as he swiftly leveled his gun at Nelson.

"*This* time there won't be any—"

A slim, flying thing of metal flashed past Nelson's head from behind him—a flung sword. It struck Sloan, not point foremost as had been intended, but flatly. The impact knocked him backward.

His foot clawed the edge of the cleft, he staggered and toppled backward still gripping the submachine-gun, then vanished into that blaze of radiant light.

A scream came out of that glory of cold fire—a scream that made Nelson feel sick.

He forced himself to turn around. Van Voss lay staring up with pale empty eyes at the Cavern roof, his throat torn out. Tark's fangs showed red in the shaking glare and there was madness in the wolf's eyes.

"Holk, listen!"

Shan Kar, sitting in the dust between the pillars with blood streaming from his breast, had uttered that whispered call.

And Shan Kar, he knew now, was the one who, with dying strength, had flung the sword and toppled Nick Sloan into the most terrible of deaths. The Humanite's face was a gray mask. Holk, who had stood

stunned by the swift turn of events, came toward him. Nelson, gripping his bleeding arm, went too.

"Holk, listen to the record of the ancients—then let the others listen too," Shan Kar whispered. "Let the war end, the Brotherhood be restored. I sinned when I tried to break it."

Holk looked up with sudden awe, as the man died. Nelson knew that he too now was hearing that solemn voice.

"You who shall come after us, take warning!"

It was dawn when Nelson came with Nsharra out of the Cavern. L'Lan lay before them in the rising sun, a valley half blackened and blasted by fire. The bubble-domes of Vruun glittered amid smoking ashes.

"But all the valley east of the river was untouched by fire," Nsharra said. "It is enough until the forests grow again."

The Humanites were gone—their warriors, led by Holk, had gone back to Anshan. And they had gone silently and heavily.

It was not only because their leader was dead, their outland mercenaries and weapons lost, their campaign a failure. It was because the whole basis of their ambition for human supremacy had been swept away by the revelation of the ancients.

For Holk had obeyed the dying command of Shan Kar and had brought the Humanites, one by one, into the Cavern to hear that mighty message of the ancients. And they had listened in sick silence.

"We know that we are guilty of wrong," Holk had said, in parting. "But we will strive to redress the wrong. Anshan shall be a city of the Brotherhood as of old."

"The past is done," Nsharra had answered. "Let there be peace now in L'Lan."

THE Humanites had so gone—but the Clans were waiting. Down on the slopes below the Cavern they waited—the packs of the Hairy Ones, the hot-eyed tiger Clan, the wild-maned brothers of Hatha. And overhead against the sunrise swung the hosts of the Winged Ones.

Hatha and Tark, Quorr and Eli, were waiting on the ledge outside the Cavern. Nelson heard their thought-cry.

"Nsharra, you are Guardian of the Brotherhood now!"

The girl looked at Nelson. "You can go from L'Lan with clear conscience now, Eric Nelson. You redeemed any guilt that was yours in bringing death to our valley."

Nelson said slowly, "I don't want to go, Nsharra. I've found something here that I never found in the outer world."

Her eyes were doubtful and at the same time glad. "Could you, a man of the different outer world, be happy here where there is Brotherhood of man and beast?"

"Nsharra, I learned what that Brotherhood can be when I ran in the body of Asha!" he told her.

He had learned, yes! He knew now that the ancient way of life that held in L'Lan was not really strange, that it was the outer world of rigid caste, of men-masters and enslaved beasts, that was really strange.

He would never again, Nelson knew, be at home in that world. He would suffer and endure with every driven beast in it and the magic of L'Lan would tug in memory at his heart until it broke.

"I want to stay, to help keep L'Lan as it is and prevent the outer world from ever breaking in upon it!" he told her. "And I want to stay with *you*, Nsharra!"

Her eyes searched his face. "I want you to stay," she said.

Then, as incredulous hope and joy sang up in his heart, she turned and sent her thought and her voice ringing out.

"Clan-leaders, will you accept Eric Nelson into our Brotherhood?"

Tark's green eyes flashed bright as the great wolf strode forward. "He fought shoulder to shoulder with me! For the Clan of the Hairy Ones, I acclaim him brother!"

Up from the wolf-packs crashed the pack yell and the greeting thought.

"Hai-ooo, brother!"

Eli's thought came coolly, swiftly. "Tark says well. The Winged Ones accept him!"

"And *my* Clan," said Hatha. "I saw him fight in Anshan!"

Nsharra looked down at the tiger. Quorr wrinkled his terrible face.

"He nearly killed some of us once," growled Quorr's thought. "But he has bled for Vruun. Blood pays back blood! We accept him!"

Nsharra grasped Nelson's hand. "Now let us go down to Vruun, Clan-brothers!"

They went down the hill, in the rising sunlight, down toward the blackened forest and the forlorn city that would live again. And as they went the Brotherhood was all about them and over their heads was a thunder of wings.

REALITIES UNLIMITED

CHAPTER I

Voice of the Dead

ABBY! Sit down!" Doctor Clint Andrews' voice was harsh with excitement. He was strapping himself into his seat—a lank loose-jointed man whose professionally blank expression was belied by alert blue eyes.

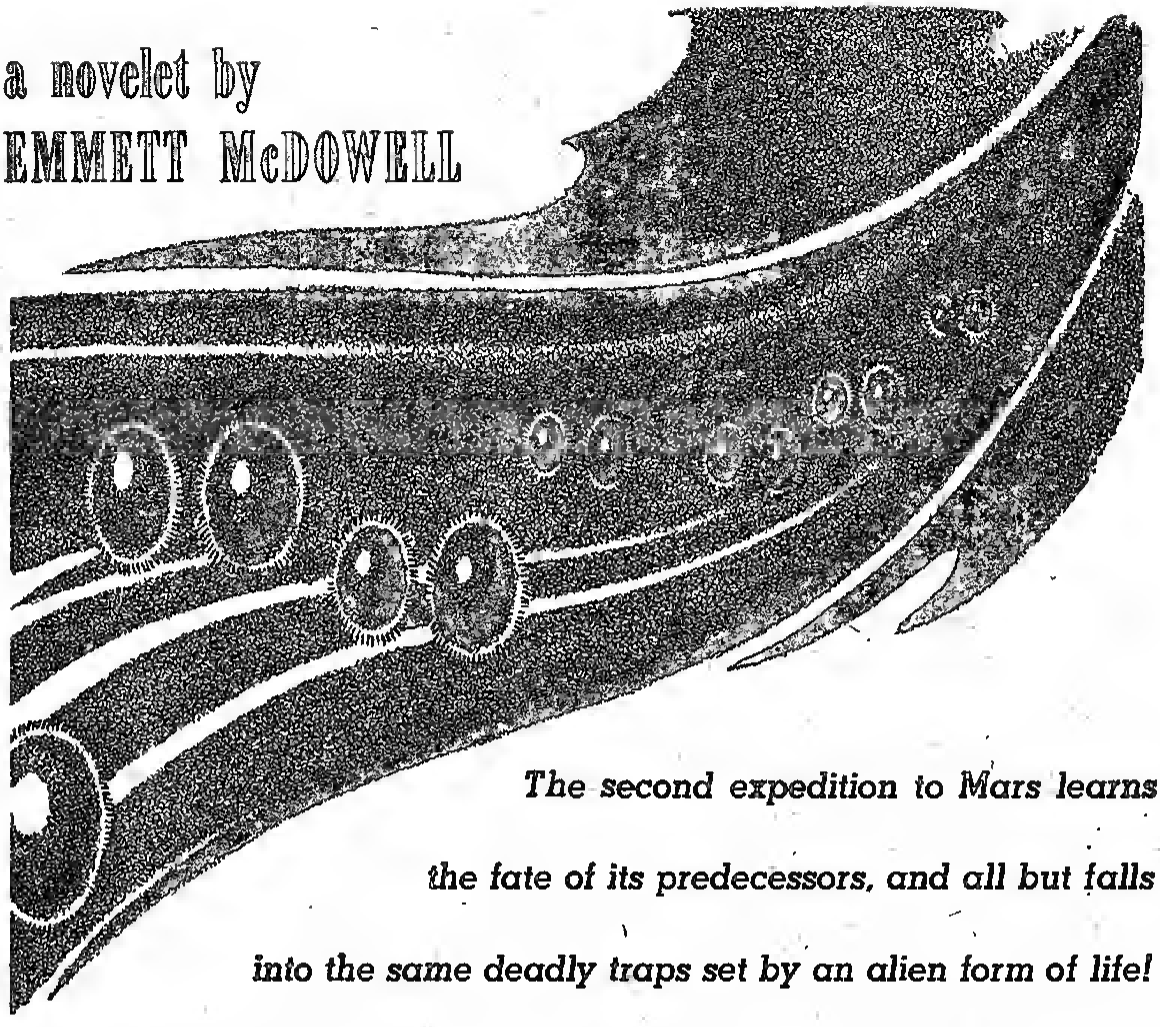
The girl didn't move.

She stood at the port, staring fascinated into

Impulses bombarded Clint's mind—strange, unbelievable thought patterns!

a novelet by

EMMETT McDOWELL



The second expedition to Mars learns the fate of its predecessors, and all but falls into the same deadly traps set by an alien form of life!

the void beyond. She must not have heard him above the roar of the landing rockets, he realized. They were alone in the *Luna's* tiny lounge, the other six members of the expedition being at their posts.

It occurred to him that this was an epochal moment—one that would go down in history. They weren't the first to reach Mars. That honor belonged to the Ramsden-Halroy expedition. But they might as well have been the first—because the Ramsden-Halroy expedition had never returned.

He felt the *Luna* drop sickeningly a hundred meters. Then it quivered to a standstill like a ball bouncing atop a jet of water, dropped again.

"*Abby!*" he yelled above the thunder. "Sit down!"

She jerked around, gave him a startled look. "But I won't be able to see."

"You can't anyway."

Abby cast a sidelong glance out the port. But the *Luna* was descending stern foremost, the surface of Mars hidden by roiling sheets of flame from the jets.

The deck fell away suddenly from beneath her feet. She lurched. A little breathless, she stumbled across the lounge, fell into a chair beside Clint.

"You knew that Commander Dunhill located the *Starshine* before we started down. It's right under us," she said..

"Fasten your safety belt."

Abby fumbled with nervous fingers at the belt. Her full name was Abby Ogilvy. She was Clint's assistant, having taken nurse's training. She was also the official photographer-historian and a very attractive girl.

"It's down there in the Lake of the Sun," she went on eagerly. "Dunhill let me see it through the telescope. And, Clint, it looked all right. Just as if it were ready to blast off. I don't see what could have happened, do you?"

Clint shook his head.

The *Starshine* had been the Ramsden-Halroy ship. Seventeen years ago it had made a safe landing at *Solis Lacus*. That much was known, because Ramsden had radioed back his position.

For a week longer daily reports had filtered to Earth. Mars, according to Ramsden, was without an atmosphere except of the most tenuous sort. There was no evidence of life. The canals were the dry remains of natural water courses.

And then the radio reports from Ramsden had stopped. No hint of disaster—nothing.

But there had been a hint, Clint thought. One sentence in Ramsden's last report said, *"Three of the men experiencing auditory hallucinations."* As a psychologist Clint had puzzled over the tantalizing suggestion in that line.

A sudden gush of cherry-red flame boiled up past the port. The jets were striking the surface, bouncing back.

"Brace yourself!" he yelled above the dull roar.

Abbie grabbed his hand, squeezed it tight. Her jade green eyes were enormous, frightened, excited.

CLINT felt the ship wabble drunkenly like a hen settling herself over a nest of eggs. There was a sudden jar that shook his teeth. The lounge tilted. Abby screamed.

Then it righted itself. There was a second jar. The roar of the jets died away, leaving a roaring in their ears.

"We're down," Clint said, in a shaken voice.

Abby threw off her safety gear, sprang to the cabin's single port. She was a big girl, rangy like a swimmer but utterly feminine. Not even the baggy bottle-green coveralls could entirely disguise that.

"Clint!" she cried. "Come here! Look!"

He put his head beside hers, peering out through the tiny transparent circle. Deimos, the nearer moon, hung like a silver thrupenny bit in the vault-black sky. There was no diffusion of light. The Martian landscape was composed of startling contrasts. Black, black shadows—the glittering face of a cliff.

Then his heart skipped a beat. About a half mile across the gravel peneplain he could see the black hull of a rocket ship pointing up into the sky.

The *Starshine!*

The clatter of footsteps sounded loudly on the ladder behind them. Clint wheeled to see Tritt, the geologist, burst through the door, his face white with excitement.

"Get your suits on, you two! We're going to examine the *Starshine*!"

"But we've just landed."

Tritt laughed. "That's what Commander Dunhill said, but he's given in." And then the geologist was gone.

Plodding through the thick dust that overlay everything, Clint kept his eyes on the other members of the expedition. They numbered eight all told—five men and three women, looking roly poly in their distended space suits.

Commander Dunhill was in the lead. The rest straggled out behind—all except Abby, who was off to one side, making a film record.

All at once Dunhill gave a shout, his voice reaching Clint through the headphones. The Commander, Clint saw, had halted. Other voices burst into frantic questions. Then everyone began to converge on Dunhill, running clumsily.

Dunhill shouted, "Careful! Don't step on them!"

"What is it?"

"Tracks!"

Clint stared down in disbelief at the thick dust—unstirred dust formed by the expansion and contraction of the rocks. A single line of footprints led straight toward the *Starshine*, now less than a quarter mile off!

Exclamations of awe rattled inside Clint's helmet. Abby was already setting up her camera. Suddenly he got it.

The prints had been made by some member of the Ramsden-Halroy Expedition before oblivion engulfed him. There was no wind, no rain, nothing to obliterate them.

The footprints were seventeen years old!

"Don't step on them," Commander Dunhill warned.

But, as they drew closer to the *Starshine*, it became impossible not to trample them. The tracks were everywhere, melting into a beaten road at the ladder.

Clint's eyes followed the towering rocket ship upward. The airlock was sealed. Rows of blank ports like shoelace eyes drew converging lines towards the bullet-shaped nose.

Paula Gantner, the biologist, said suddenly, "Are—are we going inside?" Her voice squeaked in alarm.

A nervous titter ran through the others.

Without answering, Commander Dunhill began to climb the ladder.

The key hung on its chain beside the air-lock. Dunhill inserted it, twisted. The outer door slid aside, revealing a small chamber in which lights came on automatically.

Clint realized that he was holding his breath. It was as if the *Starshine* had lain dormant for seventeen years, waiting Dunhill's touch to awake.

The commander said, "Tritt, you and Gantner wait outside. The rest of you come on."

"Aw, pfui," the geologist muttered.

The nervous titter ran through them again. They were keyed to the breaking point, Clint knew. His own nerves were fiddle tight.

WHEN they were all crowded inside the lock, Dunhill touched the inner button. The door slid shut, sealing off the intolerably bright Martian desert. Air poured in with a faint "whoosh." The inner door opened, revealed a lighted alleyway and a ladder well.

"It's fresh!" Frost's voice rang inside Clint's helmet. Morris Frost was the chemist and Clint saw that he had opened his intake valve. "The air, it's sweet!"

They stared at each other through their transparent helmets, faces drawn fine in amazement.

"The reconverters," Dunhill said. "I suppose they've been operating automatically. They're self-regulating."

Abby said, "But what could have happened to the men?"

"Some accident—"

"That would kill all five of them simultaneously?" she interrupted. "I don't believe it!"

"But it must have."

Someone else said, "Maybe they're still here."

But a quick check disclosed that neither the members of the ill-fated Ramsden-Halroy expedition nor their bodies were anywhere in the *Starshine*. The engines, the massive reconverters, the radio were all in perfect shape. There was food in the lockers, water in the tanks.

The whole set-up was uncanny, Clint felt, as if Ramsden and his men had left on a short exploration only a few hours ago instead of seventeen years.

Clint found the fo'castle, began to ransack it in search of papers, a diary, anything that might give him a clue. He was going through Halroy's locker when Commander Dunhill's voice, coming through the radiophones, interrupted him.

"Clint, come up to the control room. I need you right away!"

There was something in Dunhill's tone that sent cold fingers wriggling up Clint's spine. Without bothering to shut the locker, he jumped through the door into the narrow alleyway, raced for the ladder.

When he pulled himself into the control tower the commander was thumbing through a heavily-bound journal. He glanced up, recognized Clint, thrust the volume into his hands.

"Read this! The *Starshine's* log!"

Clint glanced at the page Dunhill indicated. It was headed, *"Solis Lacus, Mars,"* and then the location in degrees and minutes, followed by the date.

"The last paragraph!" Dunhill said impatiently.

Clint's eyes dropped to the bottom of the page, read:

"Jenks, Headen and Shepherd insist they hear a rushing noise similar to wind. Examined the hull for leaks. Hull intact. Obviously some form of auditory hallucination. They are normal in all other respects. A psychiatrist should be included in the personnel of exploratory voyages of this type. The distances, the alienness play hell with the psyche.

The next entry was brief.

Both Halroy and I heard the wind today. We're to make a short prospect for fossils in the morning but the men are in such a nervous state that there is little likelihood of accomplishing anything.

"That's the last entry," Dunhill said in a throaty voice. "Odd. I mean all of them experiencing the same delusion."

Clint frowned. "It sounds like hysteria—contagious, probably progressive. I'm more interested in what caused it."

Tritt's voice blasted suddenly inside Clint's helmet, almost deafening him. The geologist, who'd been stationed outside, was yelling.

"Commander Dunhill! Commander Dunhill. Get out here quick!"

"Keep your voice down," Dunhill bellowed. "What's wrong?"

They could hear Tritt's hoarse breathing as he made an effort to get himself in hand.

"Speak up, man!" Dunhill barked.

"It's the Ramsden-Halroy expedition,"

Tritt said shakily. "They're out here—all of them—dead!"

CHAPTER II

The Blinding Mist

CLINT rose from beside the bodies, his expression unreadable through his transparent helmet. The five members of the Ramsden-Halroy expedition were sprawled in a shallow depression scarcely a hundred yards from the *Starshine*. Tritt had stumbled across them while making a circle of the ship.

"Well?" Commander Dunhill demanded.

Clint had partially stripped one of the bodies—a gaunt, black-bearded fellow whom he recognized from photographs as Ramsden, the astro-physicist. The body was frozen solid and in a perfect state of preservation, looking very much as Ramsden must have looked when he died.

Clint hesitated, said, "Asphyxiation."

"What?"

"Their oxygen tanks are empty. It looks as if they were groping around in the dark hunting for their ship and then became discouraged and lay down here to die."

There was a chorus of horrified gasps from the others, who stood in a semi-circle behind the commander. Tritt was trying not to be sick inside his spacesuit.

Dunhill said, "But there's the *Starshine*! They've torches in their knapsacks. Even if it had been dark, they couldn't have missed seeing it from here!"

"Perhaps I'll be able to tell more from an autopsy. Their suits may not have been properly shielded. Something might have blinded them—"

"Listen!" Abby cried.

Everyone swung towards the girl. Clint could see that her head was tilted inside her transparent helmet and there was a taut expression on her face.

"What is it?"

Abby's green eyes sought his. They were cloudy like pale jade. "I—I thought I heard the wind!"

"Can you hear it now?"

"Oh, no, no, thank heaven. It must have been my imagination."

Clint wheeled suddenly on Dunhill. "Commander, may I suggest we return to the *Luna*. Much more of this and you'll have some bad cases of hysteria on your hands."

"But the bodies!"

"They've waited seventeen years. It won't hurt them to wait a little longer!"

The next two days were filled with feverish activity. At Clint's orders, the commander kept everyone too busy to brood. The half-tracks, designed especially for Martian exploration, were uncrated and assembled. Equipment was readied and checked and rechecked.

This was, Clint decided, the most thorough expedition of its kind that had ever been planned. They had even taken a preliminary training trip to the moon, where conditions were approximately similar.

Favorable oppositions occurred at fifteen and two-year intervals, when Mars was at perihelion. The expedition had left Earth just as the fifteen-year period was drawing to a close. They were to stay two years and then return when the two planets were approaching favorable opposition again.

The members of the party who doubled as the crew, were all top figures in their respective fields. But more important, perhaps, the Institute of Cosmology had chosen men and women still in their thirties, in perfect health and with an unusual mental and emotional stability.

Clint was in the ship's hospital, making a routine check of the personal equation graphs, when someone knocked.

"Come in," he said, without raising his eyes.

Abby Ogilvy entered softly, closed the door behind her. She wore a fresh suit of the bottle-green coveralls, bringing out the green of her eyes.

"Clint."

"Yes?"

When he still didn't glance up her smile faded. She sat down, clasped her hands nervously in her lap.

"You've finished the autopsy on Ramsden?"

"Yes."

"I need the information for my report. The commander sent me to you."

"Asphyxiation."

The girl's eyes widened. "Nothing else?"

"Not a thing. He was in perfect physical health when he died." Unconsciously he emphasized the word 'physical.'

"But why? Why should they sit out there

a hundred yards from their ship and allow themselves to die?"

Clint straightened the personal equation cards. "I don't know." He hesitated, gave the girl a doubtful look. "Keep this out of your report for the present. But we're in for trouble. Paula Gantner heard the wind yesterday."

ABBY blanched.

"I don't like it," Clint went on dryly. "Of course it may be no more than suggestion." He shook his head. "But it's playing heck with their personal equations. Their observations won't be wort a cent unless a strict day-by-day check is made." He flicked the cards. "I'm going to need your help with these."

Abby's eyes lit up. Then an expression of chagrin passed across her face. "I'm afraid I don't understand this personal equation business very well."

Clint looked annoyed. "It's simple enough. We've only one means of acquiring knowledge of the outside world—experience. Unfortunately, experience can't be trusted. No two people see everything exactly alike.

"The personal equation is each individual's variation from the norm. And it fluctuates. But, by allowing for the observers' personal idiosyncrasies, the most universal observations possible can be obtained."

The girl looked puzzled. "Red's red."

He said, "Bosh. The color red is as much a part of an observer's nervous system as it is of the substance. Color-blind people see red as gray. Actually it isn't color at all but electro-magnetic waves."

He was launched into the subject dearest to his heart—the solipsistic universe. The fact that under our present limitations the self knows and can know nothing but its own modifications and states.

He said, "The truth is, we don't know what the outside world is like. We only know the effect it produces on us."

"Someday, though, we may be able to penetrate the barriers of self. But, until we do, chemistry and physics and all the other so called exact sciences are only approximations of reality. Because they must be observed and interpreted by imperfectly understood instruments. That's us. The human body-mind."

Abby said apologetically, "It sounds rather complicated."

"It isn't. There are certain tests that must be given. You know what they are. You've taken them yourself. The results are computed mechanically and give the personal equation. That's all there is to it. I wouldn't ask you to help but I'm snowed under."

The intraship televisor on his desk began to buzz, he switched it on, saw the commander's face materialize in the screen. "Yes?"

"I'm planning an expedition in the half-tracks tomorrow," Dunhill said. "Prospect for fossils. Topographical work. Incidentally, I thought we might back track Ramsden and his men. Does it have your okay?"

"Yes. The men need to get out."

Commander Dunhill broke the connection. Abby was staring at Clint in perplexity.

"Why does he need your okay?"

"I've the authority to overrule any of Dunhil's orders if I think they might jeopardize the men's mental or physical welfare." He paused. "You might keep that under your hat, too."

Clint sat hunched over the wheel of the plastic half-track, driving mechanically. His eyes were on the vehicle ahead but not really seeing it. Instead there was an expression of concentration on his long lean predatory face as if he were listening—listening for some sound that hovered just beneath the audible level.

Abby was on the seat beside him, her tawny yellow hair loose and falling to her shoulders. "Clint!" she began in an odd voice, "do you—" And then she stopped.

"Yes?"

"Nothing."

He gave the girl a quick, worried frown, looked ahead again. There was no road, no evidence that anything had passed this way ever. The four half-tracks were roaring one behind the other, caravan-like, across the gravel peneplain.

They were odd bubble-like vehicles of transparent plastic, hermetically sealed with tiny airlocks not much larger than broom closets. Miles behind, but still distinct across the airless Martian waste, the *Luna* and the *Starshine* poked twin black spires into the sky.

The look of concentration of Clint's face deepened. He thought that if he opened his mouth his might be able to hear. The noise seemed a little stronger. Suddenly he knew what it was.

Wind!

Wind in trees, among rocks, slapping

against the half-tracks in gusts!

HE BEGAN to sweat, a film of perspiration covering his forehead and the backs of his bony, capable hands. "Relax!" he told himself savagely. But the only thing he could think of was dementia praecox. Was this praecox?

Then it began to rain!

Clint felt his mouth go dry. Automatically he recognized in himself the symptoms of shock—shallow, rapid pulse, a knot in his stomach.

And all the time he could hear the rain pelting against the car's roof. It made a dull roar like a tropical thunderstorm.

Rain!

But outside there was only the glare of sunlight on cold dry rocks and the dust dripping from the treads of the half-track immediately in front.

"Clint!" Abby burst out in panic. "Don't you hear it?"

He released his breath. "Hear it? Yes, I hear it."

"Then why didn't you say so? Sitting there deadpan, letting me think I was going crazy. I—I hate you! What is it?"

Before he could answer the radio crackled into life. "Doctor!" it said. "Doctor Andrews! This is Dunhill."

The commander was driving the leading half-track. Clint switched on the intercar system. "Andrews speaking."

"Doctor!" came the tight voice of the commander. "It's raining! Buckets full! Craziest thing I ever saw."

"Auditory hallucinations—" Clint began.

"Hallucinations my foot! Look outside!"

Clint jerked his eyes back to the black and white landscape. Driving sheets of rain had drawn a curtain across the scene. Water began to run down the plastic sides of the half-track.

"What do you make of it?" the commander demanded hoarsely.

"Hallucination. Has to be. Progressive. It's reached the visual stage." In his mind's eye Clint could see the bodies of the Ramsden-Halroy party lying in the shallow depression, unable to find their ship only a few yards off.

"Turn around!" he ordered suddenly. "We've got to get back to the ship!"

Dunhill gave the command without question. The half-tracks executed a circling maneuver, began to trundle back the way they'd just come.

Abby's green eyes were enormous. "But, Clint, you've been checking our personal equations. Haven't you noticed any abnormalities?"

"No more than could be expected under the circumstances."

"It's getting dark!" Abby said in a small voice.

He switched on the headlights. They tore a ragged hole in the falling night, made the mud shine yellow. Mud! It was clogging the treads of the vehicle just ahead.

Then it was dark.

"But the sun isn't due to set for hours yet!" Abby cried.

"Commander! Commander Dunhill!" The radio crackled into life again. "This is Frost. We've just tried to analyze the rain. It isn't matter at all—not as we know it. We can't analyze it!"

"Of course not!" Clint interrupted. "It's an illusion."

"No." Frost's voice sounded queer. "It has weight. If you could imagine liquid radiation—"

"Your sense of touch is affected. First hearing, then seeing, now feeling!" Clint's blue eyes glittered from tension. "Close up. We mustn't get separated."

A spotlight sprang suddenly from Dunhill's half-track, made sweeping circles in the night. The gravel peneplain was covered by a low ground mist, giving the illusion that there was no solidness anywhere, as if Mars itself were slowly dissolving into vapor. The half-tracks wallowed through the mist like partially submerged Mesozoic monsters.

"The ship!" Dunhill's voice rang hysterically through the intercar radio. "It's gone!"

CHAPTER III

The Martians!

IN THAT moment all of them began to appreciate what must have occurred to the Ramsden-Halroy expedition. Clint stared into the night. The ground-hugging fog billowed off in the glare of the spotlight like a restless gray sea. Nowhere was there any sign of the black bullet hull of the *Luna*.

A glance at the compass assured him that they were not off their course. According

to the speedometer reading the *Luna* should be less than fifty yards ahead.

"Halt the cars, Commander!" he said into the mike. "The *Luna* isn't missing. We are."

Dunhill jerked out an order. The half-tracks ground to a halt, nose to tail, like a procession of camels. "You mean it's here? Here within sight but that we can't see it?"

"Yes."

"Why? Why not?"

Clint was silent. Finally he said, "We're all experiencing the same illusion. Exactly. Suppose it's real—another aspect of reality."

It was Frost, the chemist, who asked, "What are you driving at?"

"I'm not sure. But no one can know what the basic nature of reality is actually like—only its effect on us, on our five senses. They reveal one aspect. But suppose there are other aspects, not apparent to our senses."

"We're not limited by our senses," Frost broke in. "What about our instruments?"

"They're only extensions. They don't give us a new sense. We're like the blind men who went to see the elephant. You remember the story. One of them felt a leg and he said an elephant was like a tree trunk. Another touched the tail and he swore it was like a rope. All of them came back with differene conceptions of an elephant and they were all partially right.

"Because of the limitations of our senses we can perceive only one aspect of reality, like the blind men. But suppose we could suddenly perceive it through other senses. What then? What would reality be like then?"

Clint stopped talking. The silence lasted a moment longer, then everyone began to clamor over the radio at once. Frost succeeded in shouting them down.

"Wait a minute! Wait a minute! Clint, are you trying to tell us that there are other planes of existence—other dimensions? Why that's sheer rot."

"No," Clint interrupted. "I'm not talking about other dimensions. I mean precisely what I said—other aspects of reality, other facets of the same thing."

They could all hear Commander Dunhill muttering, "Craziest thing I ever heard of."

"I'm theorizing," Clint admitted. "But Ramsden and his men must have been affected in the same way that we are. We can be pretty sure of that. And they died within a stone's throw of their ship. Died when their oxygen ran out."

"Exactly." Commander Dunhill's voice was loaded with significance. The half-tracks were equipped with a sixty-hour supply of oxygen. After that was used up—

Clint was bathed suddenly in cold sweat. This was his fight. But there was nothing to fight—only intangibles.

Abby inched along the seat, slipped her hand into his. "Clint, I'm scared."

Paula Gantner's voice rose suddenly in pure hysteria. "The lights! I'm going blind. I can't feel. Where is everyone? Why doesn't someone say something?"

"Paula!" they heard Dunhill cry. "Paula, I'm right beside you. Can't you hear me. Paula?"

But the biologist continued to beg someone to speak to her.

"Progressive!" Clint's eyes narrowed. "We're losing touch." He broke off.

The lights *were* dimming!

The babble of voices grew fainter, farther away. He experienced an eerie sensation of floating. He was suspended in a black void—an ego without sight, without hearing, without feeling or taste or an olfactory sense.

It was like being knocked unconscious, yet it wasn't. With a numb sort of horror he realized that he had lost all contact with his environment.

"FEAR is glandular," Clint thought alone in the pulsating blackness of his brain. "And I'm horribly afraid. Therefore my glands must be functioning. I'm still alive."

An image of Abby rose in his mind. It was quite vivid. She seemed to be trying to tell him something.

Then it was crowded out by an impulse that bubbled up from the depths of his subconscious. It was a thought—formless, without meaning.

He knew absolutely that it hadn't originated in his own mind!

Was this extra-sensory perception? Had the loss of all his senses permitted a sixth sense, a suppressed telepathic sense, to function?

Other impulses bombarded his mind—alien, unbelievable thought patterns which he couldn't find words to describe.

Automatically his brain attempted to translate the alien impulses into word symbols—tried and failed.

But he seemed to detect a rhythm in them

—and almost a meaning.

Was he in contact with another entity? He must be.

"Thought is the bridge," he guessed. "Our senses are utterly different. We are not even composed of the same substance—but we have one thing in common—the ability to think!"

He was sinking deeper, deeper into this alien aspect of reality. But there was no back-tracking, no way even to stem the tide.

Suddenly he saw Abby—a clear visual image. The frightened green eyes and tawny hair.

"Clint!" she said. "Clint!" Then, "He can't hear me. We're dead. And I'm not as frightened as I thought I would be. If only it weren't so black. Surely that's Clint! Clint! Clint!"

"Abby!"

Her eyes seemed to light up. "I was afraid you weren't real. I couldn't get your attention. We're dead, aren't we, Clint?"

"No. It's telepathy—E.S.P. The fact that all our other senses have blanked out seems to have stimulated some dormant function of the brain. I'm not sure."

"We're not dead! Then when the oxygen goes—"

Clint was suddenly aware of waves of panic. The empathy between himself and Abby was so complete that he was obsessed with the same rising terror. All his thoughts, all of Abby's seemed to fuse. It was as if both their brains, telepathically linked, had become one brain!

Abby suddenly disrupted his train of thought. "I'm thinking your thoughts—our thoughts." Then an abrupt shift: "Clint, I can feel something—horrible! All about us. Prying at my brain—our brain. Trying to get in!"

There was a surge of power. Clint became suddenly aware of Frost's ego, of the rich storehouse of science that was Frost's brain. Then Dunhill made connection and Paula Gantner.

The feeling of limitless knowledge was almost unbearable, godlike! Their thoughts flowed through him in that strange telepathic circuit—questions that were answered before they were expressed, odd snatches of memory.

"What—"

"Linked in series—"

"—hours."

It was chaotic, confusing. Clint felt that his mind would burst as one by one the others entered the circuit.

"Stop! Stop!" he was screaming mentally. "Think together!"

And then it happened.

They saw the Martians.

IT WAS like being shocked out of a deep sleep. Clint's eyes snapped open. He was standing in a bowl-like plain rimmed by distant blue hills. He could feel a springy moss-like turf beneath his feet. Nowhere was there any sign of the half-tracks or the *Luna*.

Abby clutched his hand with a convulsive desperation. Tritt and Dunhill and the others wore frozen, stupid expressions. All this Clint grasped in one swift impression because his attention was focused on the Martians.

They were standing in a group, some twenty or thirty of them, about ten yards off. They looked human but faintly blurred, like figures seen through water or a picture that's slightly out of focus.

"They're like us!" Abby said—or had she thought it? Clint was aware of the startled thoughts of his companions—chaotic impressions without unity.

"What are they?"

". . . unfriendly."

"This must be a dream! Why can't I wake up? Why can't I . . . ?"

"—all alike!"

"So they are!" Clint thought. "As alike as peas in a pod."

The Martians were uniformly tall, handsome, impassive. Wearing identical garments of green siliconex like Abby's coveralls. Clint rubbed his eyes. If he could only see them better.

He singled out one of the aliens, stared hard. The man's features jumped sharply into focus. He was smiling.

Then the Martian was stepping forward, holding out his hand, saying, "You're Doctor Andrews. We've found your psychologies very interesting, Doctor. You seem to be completely isolated units with biological, physical and cultural connections. You're quite impossible, if you'll excuse our saying so."

Clint found that he was shaking the Martian's hand. His eyes strayed to the other aliens. They didn't look alike, he realized suddenly. There was as much variation as in any human group. They weren't even dressed alike. Also he saw that there were

both men and women among them. It was confusing because his first impression had been that they were all men.

"The language," he began hesitantly. "Where did you learn our language?"

"We're not speaking," the Martian said. "Your brain transmits our thought impulses into words—the illusion of sound. But we're not speaking. The fact is we don't quite grasp what sound is. Could you explain it:"

"Sound? A disturbance in the atmosphere that vibrates the ear drum—" Clint began.

"Ah, a sense! An interpreting sense. I'm afraid that we lack it."

"But you have ears!"

"Have we?" At Clint's bewildered expression, the Martian went on. "We don't know how we must appear to you. Your perception of us is entirely subjective. Another illusion, created entirely within your own minds. I doubt very much if we are visible —as we understand the thought. Certainly we have no sense of vision ourselves."

"It's a trick!" Abby burst out. "Hypnotism."

"No," the Martian said, "but it's impossible for you to perceive reality as we do. Our senses are different. That's all."

"The editorial *we!*" Clint thought. "Always *we*. Who are you? What do you call yourself?"

THE Martian was silent. "That is the point that we are most interested in. The separation of your egos. I do not exist as a distinct individual."

"Then who are they?" Clint pointed to the other Martians.

"Part of me. And I am part of them. We are one thing. Your concept of separateness. We can't quite grasp it."

"But physically, you are separate entities.

"We're afraid that we can't conceive the term, 'physical.' It seems to be related to another concept of yours—matter. And, as nearly as we can understand matter, it is an abstraction for one of your sense impressions."

"That's all well enough!" Commander Dunhill broke in hoarsely, "but why did you bring us here?"

"We didn't. Not intentionally. We have one sense in common—telepathy. It is the bridge, as you suspected, Dr. Andrews. You are anarchistic minded. You are no stronger than the strongest brain among you. While we are—"

Clint received the concept of wholeness. The Martians were like the cells of a single brain, functioning together to form the whole. The Terrans individually were responding to the massed thought patterns of that fantastic creature—the Martians.

They were experiencing the Martian reality. Not as the Martians knew it. Because they were still limited by their senses, by their own habit patterns of thought, by semantics.

What they were experiencing was a human interpretation of something that was inconceivable as it really was. It wasn't life in a biological sense at all. It wasn't even matter.

"But can't you release us?" Clint demanded harshly. "We'll die. Cease to be." He pictured their bodies in the half-tracks, their need for oxygen if the body-mind were to continue functioning. "We have forty hours—maybe less."

"Cease to be!" The idea of death seemed to intrigue the Martians. "So that is what occurred to the others of your species who preceeded you!"

Clint nodded. An idea was trying to emerge from the back of his mind. Suddenly he drew in his breath.

The Martians' telepathic sense wasn't haphazard like theirs. Of course it wasn't. It was under perfect control, like speech. It could mean only one thing.

These alien telepaths had sensed their presence on Mars and deliberately set out to snare their minds!"

"Exactly," the Martian said placidly.

Clint's fists clenched, his nostrils flared. "But why?"

"Surely you can understand that. Your species is our first contact with another reality. We've suspected that there might be as many variations of reality as there were senses to interpret it. Your minds give us a channel through which we can explore your perception of basic truth."

"But we'll die and you'll learn nothing. Let us get back to the spaceship where we can get oxygen . . ."

The Martian's expression was totally devoid of emotion. He might have been an entomologist clapping a bug into a bottle of chloroform.

"It requires time to establish dominance. Especially since you have been warned. You could escape."

Clint may have had the illusion of being disassociated from his body but rage and fear

acted like a primer to his adrenal glands. His face blackened, his blue eyes glittered crazily. He took a half step forward, lashed out with his balled fist at the Martian's face.

CHAPTER IV

Flight From Obsession

NOTHING happened.

Nothing at all, except that the Martian was now standing just out of reach. "That was senseless," he said.

With an effort Clint got a grip on himself. It was not only senseless—it was childish. Neither he nor the Martians existed as matter in this plane of reality.

His real body was a mass of tissue, flesh and bone sprawled in the seat of the half-track, inexorably burning up the oxygen.

The Martian said: "Time seems to be vital. Get on with the investigation."

Blackness welled up suddenly in Clint's brain, swirled outward. For the second time he experienced the terrifying sensation of being suspended in a lightless, limitless void. Only this time he was not alone.

Something alien had crawled in with him—something that pried and pried with cold relentless fingers.

"Make contact!" Clint thought. "Must make contact!"

It was like a nightmare when the mind, besieged by some nameless dread, tries to shatter the spell of sleep. If he could only move or yell—but he had nothing to fasten onto.

Then like an electric shock the Martians' thought processes seared into his consciousness.

"Telepathic sense entirely dormant before we stimulated it into activity. Layers of thought in their minds beneath the threshold of consciousness. These creatures aren't even aware of what goes on in their own brains."

Clint squirmed mentally. Above the thoughts of the alien telepaths he seemed to hear someone calling him.

"Clint! Clint!"

It sounded like Abby. But it was difficult to concentrate with the distracting thought impulses of the Martians cluttering his mind like tentacles.

"Abby!" he thought. *"Abby!"* He caught a misty image of the girl—frightened, bewildered. "Abby, concentrate on me. Concentrate!"

"I am. I am." Her thoughts grew weaker, fading like radio signals.

"Think, Abby!" He could feel the Martians trying to block communication between them, keep them isolated. Why? Why?

An idea suddenly took possession of him. If the Terrans could unite, telepathically pool their resources—He remembered the strange flood of power he'd felt when their telepathic sense had first awakened. Like brains linked in series.

"Abby!" he thought. He tried to put everything else out of his mind—everything but the girl. Her yellow hair, the way the corners of her mouth dimpled when she smiled, her enthusiasms.

"Clint! oh, Clint! You feel so close that I can almost reach out and touch you!"

Clint felt suddenly giddy with triumph, with that strange surge of power. "You can understand me?"

"Yes."

"Think together. Think of Frost. Put our minds together."

"I feel so funny—sort of light headed.

"Frost!"

"Yes. I'm thinking of him. Can't you tell?"

Unexpectedly, Clint became aware of the chemist's ego, of Frost's confused, belligerent thinking.

"Frost, are we reaching you?"

"That you, Clint?"

"Yes. Abby too. Concentrate, Frost. Think of Dunhill. Try to reach the commander."

"What's that?"

"Think together. Not as individuals but as one. Break the Martians' hold."

"Yes," doubtfully. "It might work."

CLINT became aware of a pessimistic thought surging uppermost. "No use. Martians too strong." It depressed him. He could feel his contact with Abby and Frost stretching thin.

"It's a trick!" he thought with sudden desperate fury. "Abby! Frost! It's a trick of the Martians to separate us!"

There was no answer.

He was alone—alone in the appalling blackness of his own brain. The thread binding them together had snapped.

Clint's spirits sank into a fatalistic acceptance of defeat. He could feel the alien

wordless thought impulses of the Martians sieving his mind for knowledge. He tried to shut them out, ignore them, relegate them to his subconcious.

It was like closing a door behind him!

For a moment their thoughts lingered on like voices echoing down the corridors of his mind. Then they were silent.

Dimly he became aware of Abby again. "Clint," she was calling. "Clint, we're still with you. Clint, can't you hear us?"

Hope surged upward like a flame. "Abby! Don't think about the Martians. Close your mind to them like—like an unpleasant memory!"

"I have. I've been thinking about you, darling!"

He was conscious of a warm wave of empathy. They seemed bound together in an indissoluble union that included Frost.

The chemist was urging them to contact Dunhill. "We need more power—more power," he thought over and over again.

Suddenly Dunhill came in. With the peculiar clarity of their combined thinking the commander grasped their purpose immediately.

It was easier as each succeeding member of the expedition was absorbed.

"Put our minds together!" Clint kept insisting. "This new telepathic channel opens unlimited possibilities. We've always been alone before. Impossible to penetrate private world of experience. Now we're united. We aren't eight individual brains. We're the sum of—"

"Collectively we hold mankind's total knowledge," Frost interrupted.

"That's it." The instinct of self preservation ran through Clint like a white-hot wire. "Our reality is here—the *Luna*, the half-tracks, all of it, if we could only perceive it! Reconstruct it. We're eight brains linked in series. Eight specialists. A unique thinking machine!"

He tried to visualize the cold glaring Martian wasteland as he'd seen it last, the turtle-like procession of half-tracks, the twin hulls of the *Luna* and the *Starshine*.

The picture was very clear. Detail by detail it began to come back.

He could feel the thoughts of the others pulse through him. He concentrated on two senses—the feel of the cushions beneath his body, the scene through the half-track's plastic rind.

For a moment he seemed to break through. He caught a fleeting glimpse of the oxygen gauge.

The needle had long since swung past the red danger line. It hovered at fifty-eight hours. Two hours were left—only two hours!

Had it been only his imagination?

And then he was sinking again—sinking into deeper darkness, the tentacles of Martian thought waves squeezing at his brain, dragging him down, down . . .

He tried desperately to visualize Abbey on the seat beside him, the warmth of her hand in his, the warmth in her wide green eyes.

He heard her say, "Clint, we've done it!"

He sprawled back in the seat, drenched with sweat, trembling as if he'd just run the mile.

"Back to the ship!" Dunhill cried over the radio. "Get back before those things obsess us again!"

ACCELERATION dragged at Clint's vitals, brought the sweat to his face. He lay face-down in the *Luna's* sick bay, strapped into a pressure suit.

There was still time to make the return voyage before Mars and Earth swung too far apart but it was going to be close. It had required an intricate bit of astrogation with the Martians battering at their subconscious.

Without warning the pressure relaxed. Clint sat up, feeling suddenly buoyant, and began to skin out of his pressure suit. From the corner of his eye he saw Abby climbing out of the next bunk.

"A hundred and sixty-seven days," she breathed, "and we'll be back on Earth. Good old Earth."

She paused, staring at him with startled green eyes. Then she began to blush—violently. "Why, Clint, I never thought you—"

He laughed, thrust his feet into magnetic sandals, started for the door.

"I think you're horrid!" she said.

"Do you?"

She looked suddenly confused. "Isn't this awful?" she asked in a small voice.

The aroma of coffee filled Clint's nostrils as they entered the lounge. Everyone was there, he saw, sitting about the table with strained unhappy expressions.

There was no small talk, no rejoicing over their escape. Clint grinned cheerfully, slid into a chair.

"It's no laughing matter!" Frost blurted out.

Tritt said, "I've never been so embarrassed in my life. Damn the Martians!"

Clint let his eyes run around the circle of distraught faces. He alone seemed at ease, his eyes glittering with some pent up emotion. He spoke abruptly.

"There's no use trying to ignore it. We're telepathic. Apparently, once the sense has been aroused, it continues to function.

Commander Dunhill smashed his fist on the table. "You're the psychologist. Can't you do something, Andrews?"

"There must be some means of erecting a mental barrier. We're too unfamiliar with the sense yet to understand how to use it. We'll just have to bear with each other. But that's unimportant."

"The devil it is," said Dunhill.

"Can't you realize what this means?" Clint burst out, unable to contain himself any longer. "We're unique—an amazing thinking machine. There's never been anything like us before. We represent a cross section of most of the sciences. There's nothing we can't accomplish collectively. Immortality—inter-stellar travel—"

Frost gave a short bark of laughter. "Eight heads are better than one. Is that it?"

"Exactly! When all eight react as one brain!"

They looked at each other, startled, reading each other's thoughts, seeing the infinite possibilities opening ahead of them.

"Now," Clint said, "curse the Martians if you still want to."

Paula brought in the coffee from the galley just then and Abby got cups. They sipped it uncomfortably. They were still far too self-conscious to relax.

Frost said suddenly, "It just occurred to me what the rain must have been—intense cosmic radiation. Mars hasn't any atmosphere and I think the rays are perceptible to the Martians' senses. Rain was as close as our minds could picture their sense impressions."

He stopped, a look of confusion on his face.

"I forgot. If it occurred to me it did to you too. It still seems more natural to talk out loud."

"Of course it does," Clint agreed. "We're like cripples who've just had the use of their legs restored to them. We have to learn to walk."

Abby said, "Clint."

He gave her a startled look, then rushed on.

"When we master this—this team thinking, I'd like another crack at the Martians—at their aspect of reality."

Abby's green eyes were glowing. "Clint, I can't help it. I've been thinking it ever since—" She swung on Commander Dunhill.

Dunhill looked completely taken aback. "But would it be legal?"

"Of course it would. The old ship's captains could marry couples. Why—"

"Here," Clint interrupted in alarm, "I'm not at all sure I want a wife who can read my mind."

"Of course you do, darling. Don't I know what you want?" She broke off, her green eyes growing round as florins. "Really Clint—". She suddenly put her hands over her face, ran out of the room.

Everyone was grinning broadly—everyone except Clint. It was the first time any of them had seen him confused. Then he began to smile.

"Maybe," he said, "before we begin to study this telepathic sense, we'd better polish up our sense of humor."

MAGNUS RIDOLPH USES MATHEMATICS AS HIS WEAPON WHEN HE CLASHES WITH A SPACE-PIRATE IN

SANATORIS SHORT-CUT

By

JACK VANCE

A Brilliant Story Coming in the Next Issue!

the window of the Greater Council Hall, watching from this eminence above the world and the red plains. He too was getting old. Strong and young he had voyaged far on dangerous ways to bring the treasure back, but now he voyaged no more. Science had prolonged the beating of his heart a thousand years beyond his time, but now he was old and stiff and the Council Chamber was cold.

The voices were thin behind him. They echoed oddly in this reverberant tomb. Seats were here for all the Council members of full six hundred systems. But the seats were empty now and their metal threw back the reedy whine of the clerks who called them all to order, reading names which had been gone these seven hundred years, all formal, all precise, and noting that they were not here.

Mankin, Grand President of the Confederated Systems, sat hunched and aged upon his dais, looking out upon his servants, listening to the threadbare rite.

"Capella!"

Silence.

"Rigel Centaurus!"

Silence.

"Deneb and Mizar and Betelgeuse!"

Silence.

And onward for six hundred names.

Silence.

For they were mighty there in the stars and Mother Earth was old. They were thriving across a mighty span of ten thousand light years. And Mother Earth no longer had any fuel. They had taken the oil from her deepest springs and the coal from her lowest mines. They had breathed her air and forged her steel and taken their argosies away. And behind them they had scant memory.

EARTH had no power of money now, no goods, no trades, no fleet. And the finest of her strong young men had gone this long, long while. The lame, the halt, these and the dimmest of sight had strayed. Now there was nothing.

"Markab!"

"Achenar!"

"Polaris!"

No one sat there in those seats. No one.

Lars, the Ranger, stood and stiffly shook out his cloak. He couched the ceremonial space helmet in the crook of his arm and advanced formally to the dias. He bowed. He might have reported there in the ritual that the fleets were ready and the armies strong, that as General of Space he could assure them all was at peace in space.

But he was suddenly conscious of who they were and how things stood and he said nothing. There was Greto, once a wizard of skilled finance, sitting chin on breast in an adviser's chair. There was Smit, the valiant warrior of five hundred years ago. There was Mankin, tiny in his robe, crushed down by years and grief.

About Lars swirled, for an instant, the laughing staff of centruies back—young men with the giddy wine of high risk in their hearts. About Lars thundered the governing mandates of Earth to Space, to System Empires everywhere.

Then he saw the four of them and the clerks, alone here on a world which was nearly dead.

He broke ritual softly.

"There are no fleets and the armies have melted away. There is no fuel to burn in the homes, much less in the cannon. There is no food, there are no guns. I can no longer consider myself or this Council master of space and all that it contains."

They had all come there with a vague hope that it would break. It had broken. And Greto came to his feet, his wasted body mighty and imposing still.

There was silence for a while and then Greto turned to the dais. "I can report the same. For fifteen long years I could have said nearly as much. But I admit now that Earth is no more."

Smit lumbered upright. He scowled and clenched a black fist as he looked at Lars. "We have our fleets and our guns. Who has been here these last decades to know that they are without fodder. Bah! This thing can be solved!"

Mankin hunched lower, opened a drawer and brought out a tablet. As he set down his water glass, he belched politely and looked from one to the next bewildered, a little afraid. He had been able to handle many things in his day.

He fumbled with his reports and they were all the same. People were old and children were few. The food was gone and winter would be cold.

He cleared his throat. Hopefully he looked at Smit. "I was about to suggest that some measure be taken to remove the few thousands remaining here to some planet where food and fuel are not so dear. But I only

hope that I can be advised—"

"You could remove nothing," said Greto, thrusting his hands into his pockets. "You could take nothing away. For there's not fuel to lift more than twenty ships from the surface of Earth. The cause may be lost, but I am not lost. Earth is no longer tenable as she is. I propose that, with credits long past due, I force the purchase of atmosphere manufacturing equipment and other needful things."

"Credits!" said Smit. "What do I know of credits. If this thing is at last in the light and the need is desperate, I can give them the promise of guns in their middles. Need they know?"

Mankin looked from one to the other. He was heartened a little, for he had begun to see these fabulous men as little more than companions of his desultory chess games. But he did not heed them too much.

He turned to Lars. "What says the General of Armies and Admiral of Fleets?"

LARS, the Ranger, laid his helmet on the clerk's table. All semblance of formality fell from him as he took a pipe from his pocket, loaded it and lighted it with his finger ring. He looked from Mankin to Greto.

He said, "My fleet has not fired a jet in so many years that I have quite forgotten how many emergency charges were left aboard. I do know that mechanics and even officers have long since used all reserve atomic fuel for the benefit of lighting plants in the cities and our few remaining factories. At the most, on all our five continents I seriously doubt whether or not we retain enough fuel for more than two or three hundred light years. That is, of course, for one of our minor destroyers. Hardly enough for an extended cruise of space.

"At the old navy yard at the Chicago spaceport I daresay there may be four destroyers in more or less workable condition. Certainly there are enough spare parts in the battleships to complete them and make them usable. In our service lists we have a handful of technicians who though they may be old, still retain some of their touch.

"We could probably beg enough food in the way of voluntary contributions to provision the trip. Perhaps we are just dreaming. We may be at best only old men sitting in the sun and thinking thoughts much better carried out by young sinews. But I for one would like to try.

"Today I walked through the streets of this city and an illusion gripped me. Once more I was a young man returning from a colonization in the Capella system. The sidewalks were lined with people, the unbroken pavement glittered before me, thick with roses. Young boys and girls darted in and out amongst the crowd adding their shrill cries. I knew how great, how strong Earth was. And then, the illusion faded and the pavement was broken and the roses were thorny weeds, and an old woman whined for bread at the street corner. I saw but one child in half a hundred blocks of walking, and he was ill.

"An old man is old and has nothing but memory. It is youth which plans, endeavors and succeeds. Frankly, gentlemen, I have but little hope. But I cannot stay, while even a few years remain, and know that mother Earth which I served for all my thousand years is dying here, forgotten, and unmourned."

He sat looking at them a little while, puffing his pipe, swinging an ancient but well-polished boot, not seeing them but remembering.

Smit again blustered to his feet. "We are speaking of dreams. I know very little of dreams but I demand to be told why our friend desires to beg for food? Are we still not the Government? Must we dig in garbage cans to provision our Government's expeditions and crawl in dungheaps for a few crumbs of combustium? The first right of any government is to enforce its will upon the people.

"I highly approve of the expedition. I demand that I be allowed to take one section of it. And I desire, if this matter be agreed upon, that all necessary writs and manifestos be placed in my hands to make it a reality."

Mankin looked nervous, took another tablet and washed it down. It had been three hundred years since an expedition of any major import had been planned in this chamber. All the major expeditions were formed on Centauri now, where food, fuel, and crews were plentiful. The bombastic tone of Smit had battered Mankin. He looked at Greto.

Greto was aware of the eyes upon him. He shifted his feet nervously. Hesitantly he said, "I approve of this expedition even though I have little hope of its success, for it will be very difficult to attend to the

financing here. Our funds are in an impossible condition. Our currency is worthless. I take it that at least two units, perhaps four will be sent. I myself would like the command of a unit. But how we are to finance the voyageurs is a problem I cannot readily solve. One Earth dollar can be valued no higher than one-thousandth of a cent on Capella. This means I must assemble millions." He rubbed his thumb against his forefinger. "They like money out there in those systems."

"Print it," said Smit, "Who'll know the difference. And if you are to command one of the units then my advice is to print a lot of it."

MANKIN coughed, he looked at the three of them and knew that it was he who must make the decision. A small flame of hope was leaping up in him now. He thrilled to the thought that Earth might once more prosper and send forth and receive commerce and trade. The strangley renewed vitality in Smit's voice gave him assurance.

"Gentlemen," he said, "you give me courage. Unless one of you has some objection to offer, I hereby decree that, if possible, three units be dispatched singly on this mission. They will progress as far as possible through the empires of space and the outer worlds and will return with whatever succor or tidings each has been able to obtain. This mission would be worth while even if you return with no more than a few hundred pounds of Element One Hundred and Seventy-Six. There must be some way, gentlemen, there *must* be some way."

Lars the Ranger stood up. "I shall order the preparation of three destroyer units and do what I can to provide them with fuel and food. If it is your will, I shall command one of them and place two at the disposition of Smit and Greto."

He about-faced and approached the door, where he turned.

He said, "I can hardly believe, gentlemen, that we have at last decided upon a course of vigorous action. Who knows but what we shall succeed?" The door of the Grand Council Chamber shut behind him.

Rumors spread far and wide across the planet and hope attended by many doubts turned people's eyes to the night skys where the stars blinked strong and young. A few broadcasting systems expended hoarded ergs of power to announce the departures of the expedition. Several old time glass paper editions of the newspapers in Greater Europa were given over exclusively to accounts of the various explorers. Smit was cited as the commander most likely to succeed, and his boasts at the spaceport before he took off were quoted as the purest truth.

A week after Smit's departure much space and talk was devoted to the fabulous Greto who's reputation as a financier had been founded fifteen hundred years ago with the Capella exploitation. They neglected the fact that it had been his further speculations which had impoverished him. They placed their hopes in his ability to "flim-flam the money moguls of the greater empires."

When it came the time of Lars, the Ranger, to depart most of the news value of the expeditions was gone. Lars, the Ranger, had very little to say at the Port. No one questioned the mechanics or remarked the fact that he had prudently taken weeks to groom his ship and to choose his crew. But old officers came and offered this one a map, that one a chart, and another a handful of bullets. Men who had ranged far and knew, were on hand to bid him Godspeed and good luck among the spinning suns, the comets, and flaming stars. They toasted him in farewell, and Lars, the Ranger, was gone.

Earth, only half-remembering, waited and starved. Winter came. Frugal of their power, the expedition ships transmitted no messages. And Mankin, day after day moving thin-worn chessmen idly about on his board, bided his time.

The plains and mountains lay red, the thin air moaned bitterly cold about the towers of the government building. Sand drifted across the char-marks on the rocket field. Then spring came, and summer came, and were gone again and another winter lay coldly dusty upon Earth's breast.

One bitter morning a battered and rusty "Mercy" which had borne Greto came to rest on the Government field. The instant it was cited each man thought of his rank and vied at the doors of the council chambers to give welcome to Greto. But it was no smooth and wiley treasurer who came up to the big black doors. Greto hobbled, tired and bent, his space clothing ragged and out of repair. He was worn by hunger and all the bitter hardship of space. He did not need to push through the crowd; his appearance alone compelled it to fall back.

The doors opened before him and he en-

tered. Mankin was about to mount the dais in formality when he saw Greto.

He stopped. Tears of sympathy leaped into his eyes. He came forward, arms outstretched. "Oh my friend, my old friend," and he quickly seated him in a chair and brought him wine.

"Where are your officers and crew?" said Mankin. Greto did not need to answer. His eyes remained steadily on the floor. He turned over one hand and let it drop.

"From hunger when we had no food, and from sickness for which we had no medicine. I am ashamed, Mankin. I am ashamed to be here."

MANKIN sat on a small stool and folded his hands in his lap. "I am sure you did what you could, Greto. Nothing can tell you how sorry I am. Perhaps things do not go so well with them."

Greto shook with sudden anger. He lifted his worn, starved face. His eyes glared up through the ceiling and at the unseen stars.

"Things go well enough up there. They are fat, they are wealthy." He grasped Mankin's hand. "They hate us. They hate us for the rules and mandates we put upon them. They hate us for the taxes that once we levied. They hate us for the wars we fought to stop. They hate us for the centuries we depreciated their currency to uphold the value of our own. Pluteron in the Alpha Draco Empire laughed at me when I came. He laughed with hysteria and was still laughing when I left. There was no mirth in that laughter. There was only satisfaction. They hate us Mankin. We shall get nothing from them—nothing!

"Cythara of Betelgeuse took up a collection among the officers of his court to put a wreath in orbit about our sun after we are gone. I have been driven by laughter, by scorn."

He sat for a little while, chin on his breast. "Help me to my house, Mankin. I am afraid I have not long to live."

But it was Smit's return which spread the blackness of gloom across the world. For Smit was neither starved nor weary. Hate stood like a black aura around him through which cracked the lightning of his voice. Feet planted wide apart he stood in the spaceport. He met all who came to him with such a tirade concerning the ungratefulness of the children in space that the world was shocked into hopeless rage.

He had gone the length of space, stopping everywhere he deemed it expedient. Everywhere he went he had met violence and suspicion. He had crossd the trail of Greto several times. He spoke of the Greto Plan to stabilize the currency of all space, with Earth as the central banking house, and the brutality with which the scheme, quite feasible, had been everywhere rejected. He told how Greto had sought to borrow a sufficient amount to rehabilitate Earth, and the outrageous interest that had been promised and how the governments which Greto had approached had fought Smit with the plan on his arrival.

But this was not the seat of bitterness with Smit. He told them of spacefleets equipped with weapons more deadly than those that Earth had ever known. One governor had given him a slingshot and had ordered him to fight a soldier equipped with a magnetic snare. And Smith had spent two weeks in a foul prison for smashing the governor's teeth.

He had been refused food, fuel, water, and medical attention for his men. He had been scorned and spat upon and mobbed from Centauri to Uruk. He had been insulted, rejected, and given messages of such insulting import for Earth that here, delivering them, he seemed about to burst apart with rage.

The story of his return journey was one of violence. He had brought back his men but need of fuel had forced him to loot the government arsenal at Kalrak. He had left the city burning behind him. Smit preached war, he preached it to old men, to rusted and broken machines, to tumbled and moss-grown walls.

Mankin opened the Government radio for him and for four days Smit vainly attempted to recruit technicians and scientists to reconstruct the weapons necessary to fight a war. Immediately after a broadcast in which he had attempted to stir up interest in an ancient and long unused idea of germ warfare, an old officer of the republic's fleet barred his way as he attempted to leave the broadcasting building.

Smit, still affecting the dress he had worn on his return, filthy and ragged and seared as it might be, was offended at the clean well-mended gray uniform.

"If you would help me, what are you doing here?" said Smit. "I have ordered all men to gather in the military arsenal if they wish to forward this campaign."

The old officer smiled, undaunted by the blunt rage of Smit. "General," he said, "I have no ideas and I doubt that you would listen to any from me, but I was at the arsenal this morning and I do not think that we could do anything without fuel, weapons or the materials with which to make them. But I do not come here to advise you to abandon your idea. It will fail of its own accord. I came to ask you for news of Lars, the Ranger. Certainly if you found Greto's track, you must have news of Lars."

SMIT SAW Mankin and several others were coming up the steps and welcomed them as witnesses.

"Yes, I have news of Lars. He had been in three places before I had arrived. He had said nothing, he had done nothing."

The old officer looked incredulous. "General, I am not of your branch of service and I would not argue with you, but I believe you play carelessly with the reputation of one who, if he commanded it, could have won an audience with whomever he wished, wherever he went."

Smit was stunned. "Yes, certainly, audiences he did have. But he was given no aid. This I know."

Mankin was interested. "Did you learn nothing of him?" he asked Smit.

"All I know is that when I received audience after him I was heard coldly. My requests were refused, my demands were laughed at, and I was personally insulted. I know but little of this but I can tell you this certainy that you can expect nothing of Lars, the Ranger."

The old officer turned away and as he went down the steps was seen to be laughing to himself.

For more than two months the campaign of Smit's raged feebly across the worn, arid surface of Earth. Where he had recruited, no army stood; where he had built, only junk could be seen. The waning efforts of technicians and bacteriologists finally stopped. Earth fell once more into an apathy, and at night men no longer looked hopefully at the stars.

In the first days of spring a mutter of reports came from the spaceport, and people wandered toward it in surprise to find a destroyer there, polished hull carefully repaired and a crew "at quarters" while the commander disembarked. An officer rushed from the crowd and grasped the hand of the voyageur.

"Lars," he cried. And at the shout, several men in the crowd ran across the field to form a group around the returned warrior. But the greatest number turned away. Two expeditions had arrived and the dream was spent. Hope was gone.

"What news," said the old officer? Lars shrugged wearily. He had aged.

"Little enough, my friend," Lars answered. "They are vastly busy with their own concerns out there, but here I have brought at least some packets of food." And the quartermaster behind him signaled that the presents be brought down. When they were distributed, Lars walked toward the city.

Mankin heard of Lars' arrival but did not go forth to meet him, for two disappointments were all that he could possibly bear. He had been sitting in the chill of the council room when he received the tidings from his clerk. He nodded sadly.

Lars entered the chamber and stood for a little while, feeling the coldness of it and looking at the withered Mankin in his chair.

Mankin spoke, "You have been gone for a long while, Lars."

"What of Greto and Smit?"

"They have both returned. Greto, I am afraid, is dying. He is sick rather with insults than with disease. Smit for some time was a man deprived of reason and he wanders now about the countryside speaking to no one, eating only what is thrust into his hand. He is a beaten man, Lars. This expedition was ill-starred. It would have been better that we had died at least with our dignity rather than to beg for crusts and make fools laugh. As the iron has eaten our air so has this expedition drained the last sparks of vitality from the two who went before you. It was badly timed, Lars."

Lars was about to speak, but Mankin again held up his hand.

"No, do not tell me. You have brought back your men, you have brought back your ship. Perhaps you have begged a little fuel, perhaps you have a little food. But you have nothing with which to save Earth. This I know."

Lars shook his head slowly. "You are right, Mankin, I have brought nothing. I did not expect to receive anything, since I did not beg, I did not threaten. In some

places I heard of Greto's schemes. They hated him because they hated the financial control which Earth in her power exercised over the outer empires. In all the immensity of space there is not a man who would give a plugged mean coin to save a single child on Earth, if it meant the restoring of the financial tyranny which once we exercised."

"I know this," said Mankin sadly, "We hoped for too much."

LARS AGAIN shook his head. "No, Mankin, we were greedy for too much. Perhaps I have failed. I do not know."

"What did you tell them?" asked Mankin. "What did you tell them that you dare believe they might help us?"

"I did not tell them very much. And I thought first of how I might gain their good will. I found it could not be purchased or begged. I am afraid, Mankin, that I have amused myself at your expense."

This shocked the ancient president. He leaped to his feet. "You had better explain that, Lars!"

"I dined with them," said Lars. "I looked at their fleets, I admired their dancing girls, I saw their crops, and had the old battle places pointed out to me. And I told them stories. And this, reminding them, stimulated many tales. I asked for nothing, Mankin, so I did not expect anything. I hope for nothing now. I am sorry that this is the report I must render."

"You had better go," said Mankin quietly.

For a month Lars, nearly ostracized, lived at the Navy Yard in the improved destroyer, receiving old shipmates, giving presents from his frugal stock but going unaddressed in the streets. He heard nothing but condemnation for "the man who did not even try."

Then, one morning the town was shaken by a terrible roar and with certainty that vengeance had been their return for the expedition, the populace tumbled from their beds to find six great gleaming spheres on the spaceport landing. They were larger than any other space vehicle these people on Earth had ever seen. From them came tumbling young men, well-fed and laughing. Then they began to unload equipment.

No one dared to address the newcomers. With an hysterical certainty that they were about to be enslaved the people of the capital, taking what little food they had began to stream out of the far gate. A radio message from Asia was broadcast to the effect that fourteen huge vessels, unidentified, were landing troops. Greater Europa reported being besieged but said that no overt act had been made and all was being done to evacuate the population before bombardment.

Mankin received the reports in terror on his dais. He called together his cabinet, pointedly omitting Lars. He spent some fruitless six hours in feeble and frightened debate on measures of defense. No messenger came to him from the enemy forces and, at last, he felt that he must surrender before lives were lost.

When he and his staff went forward from the palace, they found that nineteen new vessels were lying in the plain beyond the city. And that an encampment was being hastily constructed.

He was met by four boisterous young officers, each one from a different empire, all in working dress. The first of them, caught by the dignity of the cabinet and the president, and recognizing them as people of authority quickly turned to his friends and sent one of them racing back toward a nearby sphere.

Mankin took a grip on his courage. He had never looked for the day when he would have to surrender Earth to an attacking force. But now that he saw that it could not be helped, he could only try to carry it forth with dignity.

He was somewhat amazed at the courteous mien of the young officers who did not speak to him but respectfully waited for a sign from the large spaceship.

In a moment or two, hastily pulling on a uniform coat and adjusting his epaulettes, a large middle-aged man strode toward the group. He stopped at a distance of five paces from Mankin, identified the chest ribbon and the ancient robe of office and then spoke. "You are President Mankin?" he asked politely.

Mankin answered, "Yes. Whom have I the pleasure of addressing?"

"I am General Collingsby," he said. With a crisp military bow Collingsby extended his hand. "It is an honor to meet you, sir. I am sorry I occasioned you the difficulty of having to come to the port. I am ashamed at my own discourtesy in not having called on you immediately. However, command has its responsibilities and, as these are supply forces, there has been considerable trouble in establishing consignments and in

distributing our various fleets over the surface of the Earth here."

He coughed. "Excuse me, sir, but, by Jupiter, your air is certainly thin here! My blood pressure must be up off the meter. But here, permit me to invite you into my cabin where it is more comfortable."

MANKIN straightened his shoulders. "Sir, I thank you for your courtesy. I can only say that I hope you will observe the various usages of war and that you will occasion as little suffering as possible."

General Collingsby looked startled and then embarrassed.

"My dear sir," he stammered, "I do not understand you. Has not my own Governor, Voxperius, radioed you concerning our arrival?"

"General," said Mankin, "the ionized beams of communication between Earth and her former colonies have been severed for more than seventy years. I am afraid we have not had sufficient power to continue them in operation."

Collingsby looked at his staff in round-eyed wonder and then at Mankin. He looked beyond the group before him and his face lighted. "Perhaps this gentleman can clarify matters."

Mankin turned to see Lars, the Ranger, with a small group of officers, approaching.

Collingsby eagerly grasped Lars by the arm. "My dear fellow, would you please acquaint your president with the true condition of affairs. By Jupiter, I had not thought of it before but it certainly does look like an invasion. Oh, I am ashamed of this, Lars! I am ashamed of it! What a panic we must have caused. But I was certain that my Government and the other governments had sent Earth messages. Didn't you know, Lars?"

Mankin was bewildered. For the first time he had a clear look at what was happening in the encampment. He saw huge machines being unloaded. He saw that men were already at work with some of them. Beams were playing across the plains and at each place one struck puffs of smoke rose. Others were drilling into the earth and sending up high plumes of exhaust. Mankin suddenly realized that they must be re-oxygenators replacing humus, injecting heat under the crust. A faintness came over him. He could not believe what he saw and he could not hope.

Lars turned to him. "I could not tell you," he said. "I could not promise you. But truly, I did nothing."

Collingsby interrupted with a sharp "No, he did nothing. He came and sang us old ballads and told us the hero tales of Earth. He reminded us of the heritage we had behind us and of what we owed the mother planet. He made us see the quiet ocean and the green hills where our fathers lived. And then, having shrugged and said it was no more, he moved on.

"He went all through space and told his tales. In the empires everywhere school children formed subscriptions, governments formed expeditions, scientists worked on what had to be done—but here, certainly, President Mankin, you can see how this would be. After all, Earth is the 'Mother' of all the stars. Somewhere in the heart of every man in the empires lurks a fondness for the birthplace of his race. For our histories are full of Earth and all our stories, all our great triumphs, contain the name of Earth. Should we then let her die?

"And so we have come here, these combined forces, to make the old land green again, to replace the oceans, to rebuild an atmosphere, to make the rivers run, to put fish in the streams, and game in the hills.

"We'll make this place a shrine, complete and vital as once it was, where Inter-Empire councils may arbitrate the disputes of space. Here we can meet on the common ground of birth and, in the halo of her greatness, find the answers to our problems. For, in the long run the problems and the answers change very little. All the fundamental questions have been asked and solved on Earth before; and they will be again.

"But come, we have less than a week to repair all this," said Collingsby. He turned to Lars, "It's just a week to July fourth, is it not? And that was the anniversary of the launching of the first expedition to Earth's moon, wasn't it?"

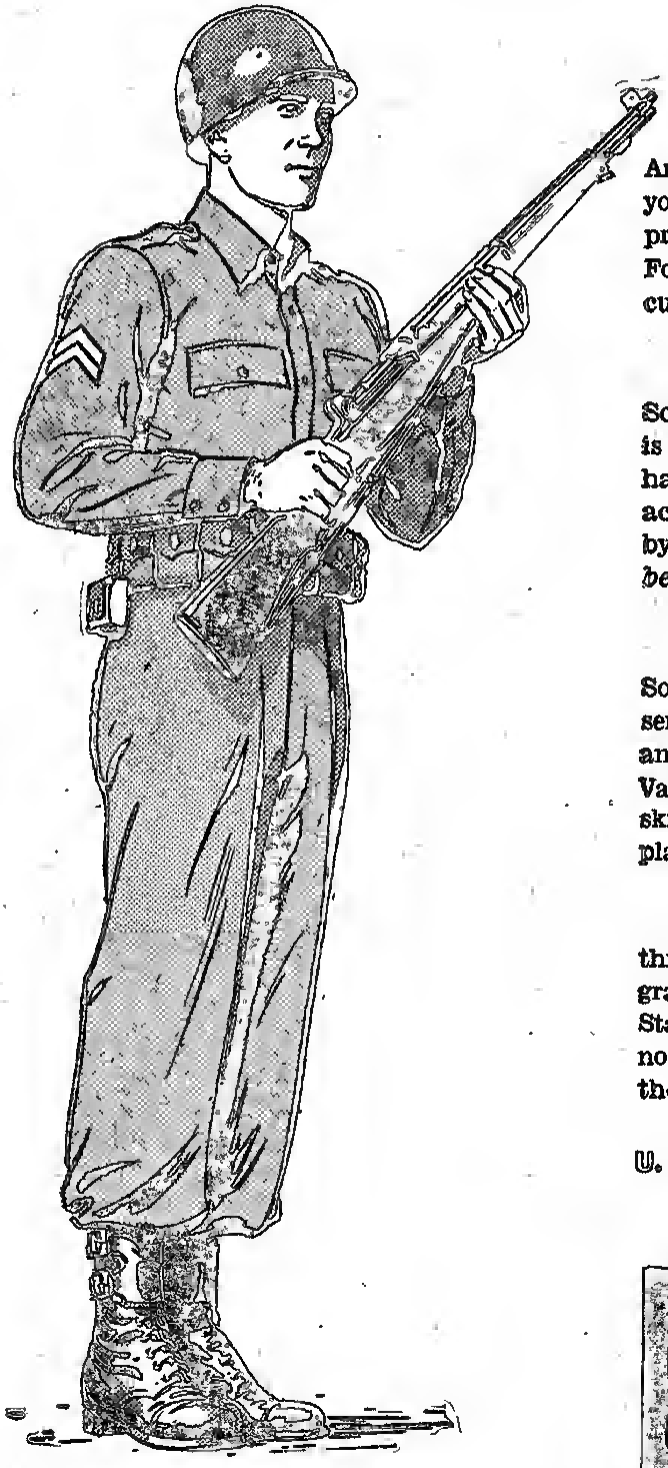
Lars nodded.

"Come into my ship where we can have some refreshments," said Collingsby. "There will be time enough to stand around in the sun when all these fields are getting green again."

They looked at Lars and he smiled at them. Mankin swallowed back a lump of emotion in his throat, and said:

"Lars, why didn't you tell me you had saved Earth with a song?"

"I'M PROUD TO BE IN THE COMBAT FORCES!"



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WHEN THE EARTH LIVED

By Henry Kuttner

A macrocosmic scientist who experiments with the atom brings existence to Earth itself but threatens disaster to humans!

WHEN Jim Marden discovered that the Universe had apparently gone insane he was already on his way to the mountain home of Dr. Leon Kent, his uncle and sole living relative. An urgent, cryptic telegram from Kent had caused Marden hurriedly to pack a bag, throw it in the back of his roadster and start the long drive to Coon Mountain, where his uncle had his home and laboratory.

Snatching a hasty meal at a roadside stand, he glanced over a newspaper and saw the first warning of the disaster that was to become cosmic in its scope. If Marden hadn't been somewhat of a scientist, in his amateur way, he would scarcely have realized the tremendous potentialities behind the news item on Page 6.

It was brief enough, stating only that, according to a dispatch received from the Mount Wilson observatory, N. G. C. 385, a nebula in the Pegasus cluster had stopped its race away from the earth at a velocity of 2,400 miles per second and was darting with even greater speed at right angles to its former course.

The layman might have passed over the item unperturbed—but Marden knew that, when a thing like that can happen, science loses its sanity and becomes an avocation for madmen.

A girl sitting near him at the counter called to the waiter. She held up a spoon—or what must have been one once. Now it was only an oddly malformed bit of metal.

"What do you call this?" she asked.

The waiter, apologizing, gave her another spoon. In a moment Marden had forgotten the incident. Obviously it was ridiculous to connect a suddenly insane nebula with the curious malformation of an ordinary spoon. Yet the two incidents were related, Marden was later to realize—and so, likewise, was the remarkable incident of the coffee urn.

Marden wasn't looking at the big silvery urn at the time and his first realization of anything wrong was a sudden hiss and a splash from beyond the counter and an astonished cry from the waiter. He glanced up, and saw a deluge of brown liquid pouring from the bottom of the urn.

SOME stories are forgotten almost as soon as they are printed. Others stand the test of time.

Because "When the Earth Lived," by Henry Kuttner, has stood this test, it has been nominated for SCIENTIFICTION'S HALL OF FAME and is reprinted here.

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Abruptly the mesh cloth which was the dancer's only garment seemed to crawl over her body

In a moment the floor within the U-shaped counter was flooded. The waiter bent to turn off the gas and suddenly froze, his bulging eyes staring up at the bottom of the urn.

"Well, I'll be—" he exclaimed. "I never seen a thing like this before."

"What?" asked the girl who wanted another spoon. Marden noticed that she was rather lovely, with greenish glowing eyes and a pert nose.

A young man sitting beside her, blond, handsome, of the matinee idol type, added, "The place'll be falling apart next, Lorna."

The waiter turned a puzzled face to Marden.

"Funny," he said. "Looks like the metal had simply curled back out of the way of the flame. There's a ring of it—not melted, but curled back—all around the hole in the bottom."

"Maybe it didn't like the fire," the blond youth said, with unintentional accuracy. The waiter shot him an unpleasant glance.

The girl got off the stool and her companion threw a coin on the counter.

"When does the bus leave?" he asked.

A grin appeared on the waiter's face.

"It's left," he said with relish. "Won't be none till tomorrow now."

"But we've got to get to Carr City," the boy exclaimed. "There's no place to stay here, even if—"

Marden said the obvious thing.

"I'm going almost to Carr City. I'd be very glad to give you a lift."

"Thanks." The boy accepted eagerly. The girl hesitated but nodded at last. Marden got off the stool, spinning a half dollar on the counter. He stumbled, nearly falling.

"That's funny," he commented, grinning wryly. "Felt as if the floor gave way beneath me." Indeed, there had been an odd sensation of —*life*—in the wooden floor, almost as though it had actually moved beneath his feet. He glanced down, noting that the cracks in the wooden planks seemed awry, as though warped and twisted. They seemed to move as he watched, writhing back to their original position. Marden blinked. An optical illusion, he concluded.

NEARLY two hours later the roadster was laboring up the slope of Coon Mountain. Half a mile ahead, across a canyon, Marden could see the bus his guests had missed. His eyes kept returning to it despite the dangerous curves of the mountain road.

There was something distinctly unusual about its method of progress. It seemed to move forward jerkily, apparently leaping a few feet occasionally into the air. At any rate, Marden was sure that sometimes he could see the bus wheels clear of the road.

He wondered what was the matter with him. Perhaps he was becoming ill. Even the little roadster seemed difficult to handle today. It did not respond readily to his hand on the steering wheel and he had a curious and inexplicable feeling of uneasiness. For some unknown reason he felt glad that he was not in a closed car.

His guests, apparently, noticed nothing unusual. The boy—Bob Harrison—had driven the girl, Lorna Newton, to Los Angeles to attend a football game and, on the way home, his car had broken down.

"The garage was swamped," Harrison told Marden. "An epidemic of accidents, it seemed. Lorna has to get back to work by tomorrow morning and I've got to get back to the university."

"Well," Marden said. "I'll catch up with the bus and put you on it. I was supposed to turn off here—" He gestured toward a half-hidden road that branched off just ahead among the pines. "But I can come back to it. I'll be up with the bus in a few minutes."

Luckily, he wasn't. The catastrophe happened just as Marden was at the hairpin turn of a narrow canyon. A hundred yards ahead he saw the bus, a double-decker affair of blue paint and chromium. Abruptly the world went crazy.

The road just ahead seemed to buckle, to leap up at an impossibly steep angle, so that the bus began to slide back. Automatically Marden jammed on the brake, sat staring.

"Earthquake!" Harrison gasped.

But it wasn't. The asphalt road fell away from beneath the bus and the vehicle smashed down with a metallic crash. The tires blew out with a deafening report. From within the bus came screams—agonized, terrified.

For the bus was—collapsing! It was folding inward upon itself, as though it were being crushed in the grip of some giant hand. Glass shattered. The windows, instead of squares, became oblongs—became mere slits until they disappeared as the metal fused.

"Good Lord!" whispered Marden. "Look at the road!"

Beneath the bus the asphalt was curling up and the vehicle was sinking slowly from sight. It was as though the road had suddenly turned into a sea of sucking mud, dragging the bus inexorably down. A pandemonium of shrieks came to Marden's ears. He saw a squat bulky figure writhing into view from a window that narrowed as he watched.

The man squirmed frantically for a moment. Then he was free and the metal coalesced behind him. He came racing toward the roadster, his mouth open in a frenzied oval of terror.

The bus was now nothing but a long ovoid of smooth, glistening metal. It shrank, became a sphere a fifth of its former bulk. The screams had stopped.

It sank from view. The asphalt engulfed it.

The squat man was plunging desperately down a road that swayed and buckled beneath him. Abruptly Marden sent the roadster rocketing up the slope at the side of the road, felt solid earth giving like sand beneath the car. He raced the motor and managed to pull free, got the roadster faced in the other direction.

The squat man came abreast of the car, leaped to the running-board as Marden beckoned. A grinding unearthly roar was coming from the ground beneath them.

Marden jammed his foot down on the accelerator. He felt the little roadster sway dizzily, tilting dangerously toward the prec-

ipice on the left. But the car's speed carried it safely down the road. He caught a glimpse of Lorna's face, strained and white.

The squat man shouted something, scrambled frantically for footing. He managed to pull himself up on the body of the roadster, opened the rumble seat, and tumbled in. Glancing down, Marden realized that the running-board had vanished. There was a thin strip of oddly blackened rubber running along the side of the car where it had been.

STILL the road swayed beneath them. Marden wrenched at the steering wheel, sent the car racing up the road that led to his uncle's home. They topped the crest of a hill and a little valley came into view—in which a ramshackle frame house was set. There was an odd flickering in the air about the house.

"Tbe car's falling apart!" Harrison shouted above the grinding uproar that thundered from the earth. The door of the car at Harrison's side was gone. White-faced, he clung to the windshield and it seemed to melt and disappear as he clutched it. A blast of wind hit Marden's face.

The steering wheel came off in his hand.

Luckily, the road was straight. He saw a tall figure come running from the frame house, pause for a moment, then retreat quickly. The inexplicable flickering in the air about the building faded, was gone. Marden pressed the brake and eased the car to a stop. It skidded, turned half around and paused with a shudder in the middle of a garden.

Above the rumbling of the earth a high-pitched whine sounded, grew louder. The flickering in the air began again—but now it was beyond the roadster and its shaken occupants. It was as though an invisible wall of strange force enclosed the house, guarded it.

Shakily Marden got out of the car, helped Lorna to alight. Harrison and the squat man hastily followed his example. They looked at each other silently. There didn't seem to be much to say.

Someone came out of the house, a gaunt, slender man, with ascetically handsome features. His age was betrayed only by the streaks of white at his temples.

"Uncle Leon!" Marden said, and paused lamely. "I—we—well, I got here!"

"So I see," Dr. Kent said drily. "Come in the house, all of you, and have a drink. You need it."

Dr. Kent explained as he worked. He talked to them while peering into a microscope and making hasty calculations on sheets of paper that littered the laboratory table. The others sat around uneasily, watching him. Harrison and Lorna sat close together on a bench. Marden leaned against the wall, biting nervously at the bit of his pipe.

The squat man was Stan Burford, a promoter on vacation. He sat rigidly on the edge of a chair, his unintelligent face bearing a look of stupid fear. Just what he promoted he never quite made clear. Marden decided that the man was a petty gambler.

Dr. Kent, still calculating busily, turned the screw of the microscope.

"I did not think it would come so quickly." he said. "I believe this is the only place on Earth where you are reasonably safe. The flickering in the air you noticed, Jim"—Marden had already mentioned this—"was due to a death ray I've adapted.

"It surrounds us, like a hollow globe of force. Or, rather of annihilation. If I hadn't seen you coming and turned it off temporarily, you'd have been killed."

Lorna repressed a shudder.

"I didn't know death rays existed," she said.

The doctor stared at her.

"My dear girl, death rays are no longer pseudo-science—they're cold fact, as you'd know if you read the scientific journals—even the newspapers. I've simply adapted the ray to my own uses. It acts as a barrier to—to—" He hesitated.

"I think I have an idea of what's wrong," Marden said. "That nebula in Pegasus gave me the clue. It's something—cosmic—isn't it?"

"Yes—an experiment, Jim—um—a cosmic experiment in which we are the subjects—the guinea pigs. You know the atomic theory, of course?"

"That this universe is merely an atom in a larger universe and so on to infinity?" Marden asked. The doctor nodded.

"That's right. An old idea, of course. It's served as the basis for innumerable pseudo-scientific stories and actually it's generally taken for granted by the world of science. But you know what I've been working on for years, Jim, don't you?"

"Rays," Marden said. "Yes. Especially the cosmic ray. You don't mean—"

"Exactly. The cosmic ray put me on the track of the truth—a truth so unbelievable, so strange, that I dared not announce my discovery. I'd have been laughed at and worse—perhaps put in an asylum. And I needed my freedom to complete my work. Whether it will do any good now—"

"The closest guess scientists have made us to the nature of the cosmic ray," Kent went on "is—life. And that's just what it is. For ages men have tried to create artificial life in the laboratory.

"All the while, they have neglected the most important factor—the cosmic ray itself, which is the source of life. All through this universe the ray has spread. And very slowly, very gradually, it has increased in power."

"But the Arrhenius theory—" Marden began.

KENT interrupted him.

"It doesn't conflict. Life spores can float from world to world—yes. Nevertheless, in the beginning, life was generated by the action of the cosmic ray. No one has guessed its source. That's because it comes from beyond the universe—from the super-world in which we are merely an atom.

"I can best make you understand by choosing familiar examples. Let us suppose that a scientist has discovered a ray which creates life. He is experimenting with the atom. He turns this ray upon an atom—an extremly complex one—under his microscope. He creates life.

"But he is not content. He wishes to experiment further. He increases the power of the ray. And life—"

Marden gasped. "You mean that in this super-universe the cosmic ray has been increased in power by the scientist—scientists, rather—who are experimenting with the atom in which our world exists?

"Soon I shall show you how I know this, Jim. Do you know what life is?"

"I know that," the blond Harrison said. "Life is adaptability and growth."

Dr. Kent snorted. "These college students! Those are merely the attributes of life. A living organism can adapt itself to its surroundings and it can grow. But what is life itself?"

"No one knows that," said Marden.

"Quite right. And the common error of the world of science is that it confines life to organic matter. Rocks, they say, cannot live. Metal cannot live. Atoms cannot live. Yet you saw those things alive this morning!"

"What?" Marden frankly stared. For a moment he had a fleeting suspicion that his uncle had gone insane. "It's impossible!"

"Don't keep saying that! Ordinarily, yes. The power of the cosmic ray—the *life ray*—at first gave life to only those elements which could readily acquire it—organic entities, protoplasm, evolving to man. Now that the cosmic ray is stepped-up the mysterious life force is spreading to all things throughout the universe. Adaptability—and growth!"

"The coffee spoon!" Lorna whispered.

They had told Kent about the incident in the roadside restaurant.

"Yes," he affirmed, nodding. "The heat of the coffee made it coalesce into a form in which it would feel less warmth than in its original shape. And the coffee boiler—the metal *did* curl out of the way of the flame.

"We can't foresee what may occur—inorganic life is so alien to ours. The weight of the bus perhaps caused the catastrophe on the road. The earth itself is growing and adapting itself. It is becoming alive."

"He's crazy," the stocky Burford whispered to Harrison. But the college boy shook his head impatiently, waiting for Dr. Kent to continue.

"The infection is spreading slowly, of course. As yet Earth feels only the first birth pangs. Later only heaven knows what will happen. In this one spot, protected from the accelerated cosmic ray, are we temporarily safe. But—" He shrugged.

"Somehow I can't really believe it," Marden said slowly. "It seems too incredible. I've always been taught that life is limited to organic matter."

"How can anyone know that when no one knows what life is? Look here, Jim—and the rest of you."

Dr. Kent arose and went to a table nearby on which a bulky unfamiliar apparatus rested. A metallic screen, about two feet square, surmounted the strange machine. Kent pressed a button. Flashing light played over the screen.

"I'll show you the super-universe," he said. "I stumbled on this during my experiments. It is a rather simple principle. I utilize the cosmic ray itself as a carrier to a visual beam sent in the opposite direction

—outward. The peculiar properties of the cosmic ray make this possihle. Without it, naturally, it would not work."

The flickering lights faded from the screen. A scene materialized into view, dim, greyish. Involuntarily Lorna cried out, clapped her hands to her eyes. A sharp twinge darted through Marden's head as his eyes tried to follow impossible curves and angles. Unfamiliar, alien ohjects were visihle—things that seemed to be constructed according to a fantastic non-Euclidean geometry.

Strange curves twisted and writhed into impossible angles. Only in the center of the screen was the image clearly defined. Yet Marden could not understand what he saw.

A machine—yes. That he knew. But it was not akin to any machine he had ever seen. It was huilt of crystal, its planes and spheres impinging somehow upon a single point where a spot of light glowed vividly—hlazing light, blinding and unearthly.

"The origin of the cosmic ray," Kent whispered, "is in that super-universe. You are looking at our own cosmos from—Outside!"

SOMETHING swam into focus—a slender, rodlike ohject, glowing with emerald hrilliance. It hovered over the spot of light and retreated.

"I think—I am not sure—I think that is one of the scientists," Kent said under his breath. "Watching the experiment that means destruction to mankind."

"Incredihle!" Harrison exclaimed. Burford, the promoter, was muttering something inaudibly.

"It is immaterial to me whether you believe or not," Kent said coldly. "I—know. And that is enough."

"But what can we do?" Marden asked. "This means destruction. There's no way—"

"There *is* a way," Kent told him. "It's a way which I've been planning ever since I got on the track of this years ago. If that super-microscope can be destroyed, shattered—"

Involuntarily Marden laughed, a short, bitter bark. His uncle raised his eyebrows.

"Still skeptical, eh? Let's return to our original comparison—our scientists, experimenting with an atom. Just suppose that some explosive compound far more destructive than dynamite were introduced under the lens of the microscope—and exploded."

"Wouldn't it wreck the atom?" Harrison asked. The doctor glared at him.

Marden interrupted. "No," he said. "It'd prohahly hlow up the microscope and the lahoratory—but the atom wouldn't be hurt, naturally. Far too small."

"Exactly," the doctor affirmed. "Well, that's the plan I've heen working on for years. And it's almost completed. I'm going to send a sphere packed with that new explosive, thernolyn, into that super-universe—and make it wreck the microscope and the machine that generates the cosmic ray!"

Stunned by the magnitude of Kent's plan, Marden could only stare. The doctor went on swiftly.

"Again I shall use the cosmic ray as a carrier beam. The thing is far too complicated to explain, nor have I time. For three months now I have been working on the final prohlem—timing the explosion so that it will occur at the right moment.

"The strength of the cosmic ray will naturally he much more powerful at its source. My calculations are based upon that. I'll let the ray itself explode the thernolyn. Jim—I'll need your help. The rest of you may do as you wish. But don't go near the death ray harrier!"

"Can I help?" asked Harrison. The doctor grunted.

"By keeping out of my way, yes. Jim, here, knows little enough but he has the rudiments of scientific knowledge. The rest of you—"

With a shrug he turned hack to his microscope, beckoning to Marden. With a reassuring smile for Lorna, Marden picked up a pencil and moved to his uncle's side.

The launching of the thernolynsphere was unspectacular. The ohject was a glistening metallic hall, about a foot in diameter, within which Dr. Kent had constructed the machinery which would send it into size. The liquid thernolyn was, at the last moment, poured into a valve in the side of the ball and Kent, after a hasty reference to his sheaf of calculations, touched a protruding lever.

Very slowly at first the sphere hegan to increase in size. In a second it was two feet in diameter—three—eight—

It became tenuous. Dimly within it Marden glimpsed a complicated array of machinery and the glistening, whitish thernolyn. Then suddenly it seemed to leap up, towering to the horizon, a hazy ghost of a sphere. Marden seemed to he within it for one amaz-

ing second. It dwarfed the most colossal structure man had ever reared.

And it faded and was gone! Into size—rushing at stupendous speed toward the super-universe, bearing the cargo which meant salvation for Earth!

"Will it really have any effect?" asked Lorna. "A mere shadow—"

"It'll be real enough—Outside," Marden said. "As it grew the atoms making up its structure expanded, naturally. But if it reaches the super-universe, it'll be quite as dense as the matter there. How long will it take, Uncle Leon?"

Dr. Kent pursed his lips.

"I'm not sure. There are so many loopholes, so many chances for error. Possibly in an hour. You see, its speed—its rate of growth—is increasing continually. The time-rate Outside is no doubt different—an hour to them might be a million years to us. Indeed that's the only reason I had time enough to make my preparations."

"There's nothing to do but wait then," Marden told Lorna. "I wish I knew what was going on outside this valley. Too bad the radio won't work."

"One thing I'm afraid of," the doctor said slowly. "The cosmic ray is increasing in power. My death beams can't battle it much longer. Indeed, it's seeping through already. Look at that!"

He pointed to a small, rounded stone, about as large as his fist, which was on the ground near by. Without visible means of propulsion it was moving slowly toward another stone several feet away. Burford, the promoter, stared with bulging eyes.

"Ye gods!" he murmured hoarsely. "Now I'm crazy too!"

Chuckling, Marden moved forward and picked up the stone. It seemed to writhe and move oddly beneath his fingers. He dropped it.

IT BOUNCED. A solid bit of rock—bounced! On hard ground, it bounded up several feet and, as Marden gasped in amazement, it went, in a series of little leaps, toward the other stone. It hit it with a little cracking sound and apparently stuck to it. The grey surfaces of the stones seemed to crawl. Abruptly there was only one rock, twice the size of either of the two original ones.

"Life," said Kent. "Atomic life. Growth—and adaptation."

The ground shuddered beneath their feet. The joists of the house cracked ominously. "Maybe we'd better stay out here," Harrison suggested, a frightened note in his voice.

"I'm going in to watch the screen," said Kent. "We'll be able to see the sphere on it when it becomes visible in the super-universe."

Burford's thick lips were moving soundlessly. Marden didn't like the glassy stare of his pale eyes. Frightened, superstitious, there was no telling what the squat promoter might do. He determined to watch Burford closely.

Nearly an hour had passed. Little had happened It had become a common sight to see stones crawling slowly along the ground, in curious ameboid movement. Too, the ground itself seemed oddly unstable, prone to shaking and giving dangerously beneath one's feet.

The house, in the very center of the invisible barrier of death rays, was little affected as yet. Once a chandelier dropped to shatter on the floor. Occasionally a window would smash for no visible reason.

Marden alternated between his uncle's laboratory, where Dr. Kent sat with his eyes glued on the screen showing the super-world, and outside the house, where the others wandered about in a somewhat dazed fashion. He watched Burford covertly. It was clear that the man was cracking under the strain.

His lips moved continually and frequently Marden would catch such phrases as ". . . Judgment day . . . all goin' to die . . . end of the world . . ." And once the man had turned to shout at him, "We'll all be dead pretty soon. We gotta make the most of life now!"

Marden had moved forward to quiet him but the promoter had become abruptly silent as Lorna came into view around the corner of the house.

"Okay," he said to Marden's sharp remonstance. "Forget it, buddy. I'll be all right."

Marden wasn't so sure. Nor was he surprised when, a few minutes later, while standing beside his uncle watching the screen, he heard an angry shout from outside the house. Swiftly he was on his feet, racing for the door.

Lorna was struggling in the grip of Burford, trying to evade the kisses he was planting on her averted face. Harrison, the college boy, was sitting nearby staring

around dazedly. A blue welt was rising on his chin.

"Stop it Burford!" Marden snapped. The promoter's head jerked back and quickly he released the girl. She leaped away, pausing in the doorway of the house as Marden lunged forward. He had seen Burford's hand dive beneath his coat and guessed what that meant.

He was right. Burford's hand came out with a gun. But he didn't squeeze the trigger. He lashed out viciously at Marden, brought the barrel crashing against the man's head. The world went black.

Dimly Marden heard a scream. He got to his feet, fighting back his dizziness, just in time to see Harrison stagger into the house. The others had vanished.

Marden got to his feet and followed Harrison. From the laboratory came a cry and the crashing of glass and metal. In the doorway Marden stopped, swaying.

Burford was backed against a wall, his gun menacing the three figures who stood facing him—Lorna, Harrison and Dr. Kent. A tangle of wreckage on the floor beside an overturned table betrayed the struggle that had taken place.

"You fool!" Kent shouted. "That's the ray projecter—the death ray—and you've wrecked it! We're unprotected now!"

"Shut up!" Burford snarled. "I'm gonna live the last few minutes of my life." He waved his gun at them.

Suddenly the floor shuddered. Joists creaked ominously overhead. Somewhere a pane of glass shattered.

Marden sent his body hurtling forward. Burford had not yet seen him and there was a chance—

The gun roared. A bullet screamed by Marden's head, buried itself in the wall. There was an unnaturally loud rending of wood. Marden hit Burford's legs, sent him hurtling back.

ACCORDING to all natural laws, the promoter's gross body should have smashed against the wall with an impact that would have driven the breath from his body. But the wall wasn't there! Marden had a flashing glimpse of wallpaper stretching and ripping, of a gap appearing in the solid wall as Burford's body was flung back. Then the two lay, dazed and incredulous, on the floor—half in one room, half in another. There was a four-foot gap in the wall reaching from floor to ceiling.

Faintly he heard Dr. Kent's triumphant cry.

"The sphere! It's there—it's outside!"

He knew that the tiny glistening globe bearing the deadly thernolyn had at last become visible on the screen, had at last reached the super-universe. Whether it would explode or not—

The fate of a Universe hung on that question. But at the moment Marden was concerned with a more immediate problem. Burford, half pinned beneath his opponent's body, had wrenched his arm free, had swung it up until the gun pointed at Marden's face. The muzzle seemed to be growing larger as the promoter's finger tightened on the trigger.

A look of astonished horror came over Burford's face. He was staring, not at Marden but at the revolver in his hand. So was Marden. It was no longer a gun.

It was alive!

The barrel twisted like a snake. It seemed to grow shorter. It was a blob of shapeless, bluish metal in Burford's thick hand. The man screamed in agony.

His fingers were caught in the writhing metal as it contracted. Blood spurted out suddenly, splashing Marden's face. He didn't move, even though he heard a crash of falling timbers. The floor twisted and swayed beneath him. He felt himself flung up as though on the crest of a wave—up and up, until his head struck something with a sickening crack. He knew it was the ceiling.

He heard Lorna scream, heard Kent and Harrison shouting. Somewhere metal crashed. The world had gone insane.

All over Earth, in that incredible moment, fantastic scenes were being enacted. For twenty-four hours inexplicable things had been happening. No one could explain them. Newspapers had carried flaming scareheads until the presses had refused to operate. But not until the last moment had the cosmic ray sent its full power roaring through the universe, the stupendous power of unchained life that had sent a nebula thundering from its course. In that tremendous second, when the earth lived, men went insane and death stalked unbridled.

Prometheus unbound! The power of life was no longer limited to organic matter and the cosmic ray ruled over an Earth gone mad!

A truck driver jammed on his brakes as

the ground swayed beneath him and stared with bulging eyes at the Los Angeles City Hall, towering into white majesty. The Southern California city's only skyscraper was moving! It was gliding out into the street, crushing buildings in its path, hurtling relentlessly toward the man in the truck. He jumped out of the vehicle and started to run. There was a grinding thunderous roar and he threw a terrified glance over his shoulder at an eidolon of smooth white blankness that was almost upon him.

The building seemed to be melting down to shapelessness—its outlines were blurring, the corners rounding. The tower becoming a mere blob. He screamed as he was engulfed and then a thing like a puddle of animate stone was smashing its way along Broadway.

In a New England cemetery the watchman was having a quiet smoke as he leaned against a tombstone, pondering over the curious events of the preceding hours. He felt an uneasy stir beneath his feet and got up quickly. He hoped it wasn't an earthquake.

It wasn't. Out of a crack in the grass-covered earth something which the watchman knew very well he had seen buried there weeks before. It looked almost human for a moment and then became a horrific mass of monstrous flesh and bone that seethed and bubbled as it crept toward him. The watchman was frozen with horror. He thought it was merely a dead man coming to life.

He didn't know that it was the atoms in the dead body which had come to life. There was no intelligence—the original organic vitality had fled forever. This was something different—adaptation and growth.

The thing touched his feet, flowed up around his legs. He felt a sharp pain biting through his body as his flesh coalesced with horror—which was merely following its natural instinct of feeding so that it might grow, just as the two rocks had merged in Dr. Kent's garden. The watchman stared silently at the tide of horror creeping up his body and little flecks of foam appeared on his lips.

And adaptation—in the Pacific Ocean, the crater of Mauna Loa had become unusually active. Natives eyed the mountain with apprehension, whispering of the Old Woman who is supposed to dwell beneath the volcano and breathe out flame when she is angry with her worshippers. An aviator, flying low over the crater, battled to hold his plane steady while his co-pilot watched with incredulous eyes.

The crater appeared to be widening.

Actually, the mountain was spreading out. The intense heat of the molten lava had caused the atoms of the mountain some obscure discomfort, and it was simply going away to a cooler place. The peak seemed to roll away on all sides, like a flood of lava descending. But it wasn't lava.

It was Mauna Loa, spreading out in a great circle, wiping out all life and coming to rest at last under the ocean that surrounded the island. The tremendous air-currents tore the wings from the plane and it dropped like a plummet to destruction.

IN THE Adelphi Theatre in London a dancer was pirouetting about the stage, wearing a skimpy but adequate garment of steel-mesh. She came to a halt in the center of the stage, with the spotlight focused upon her, striking a dramatic pose.

Abruptly the mesh cloth which was her sole garment seemed to crawl over her body and dropped to a tiny puddle of glistening silver at her feet. The audience applauded wildly, heedless of the shrieks of a fat matron in the dress circle whose several dozen diamonds had suddenly decided to unite.

They raced over her plump bosom, sending her into hysterics, and fusing in her lap, turned into carbon—ordinary coal. A quite natural phenomenon under the circumstances but one which caused the matron to drop dead of heart failure.

A European dictator, reviewing his army, was extremely pleased with a new type of tank, capable as one of his generals explained, of killing forty times as many men as the tanks used in the World War. While examining the interior of the tank the dictator cracked a joke, at which his general laughed dutifully.

Some obscure vibration in the man's bellowing laugh had an important effect upon the metallic atoms surrounding them. Soldiers standing at attention outside were treated to the spectacle of the slow collapse of the tank while the men imprisoned within it screamed vainly for aid.

Neither the dictator nor the general survived.

In Sing Sing prison a man waiting to be hanged was pleased to discoved that the bars

which held him prisoner were melting into a wholly inadequate little fence on the threshold. However, as he was about to leave, he inadvertently stumbled against the stone wall of his cell, and a hole appeared in the concrete large enough to permit easy egress.

At this he decided he was dreaming and therefore remained where he was.

In a little valley in the California mountains Jim Marden was pinned between the ceiling and a floor that had risen like a wave, listening to his uncle's exultant shout:

"I've done it! By the Lord Harry, I've done it! The sphere's exploded!"

Marden will always regret that he did not see the screen at the last climactic moment. There was really little to see, Dr. Kent told him later. The tiny shining ball had suddenly appeared on the screen in the midst of the other-world microscope—and as suddenly the screen had flared up in a blaze of white light—and had gone blank.

The explosion had undoubtedly wrecked the Outside microscope, if not the entire alien laboratory, and simultaneously the cosmic ray had ceased to function.

Marden managed to extricate himself and clamber down a steep slope that had once been part of the floor. Burford, they found, was dead. He had been crushed between ceiling and floor, a fate which Marden himself had escaped by the narrowest of margins. Neither Harrison nor Lorna was seriously injured.

They were glad to get out of the wrecked house and, for a little while, stood silent in the dusk, staring around at a world that seemed, oddly, little changed.

After a time Kent said, "There'll be reconstruction. Man has survived undoubtedly. And he'll rebuild. In fifty years—twenty-five—there'll be no trace of this catastrophe."

"There'll be no—recurrence?" Harrison asked weakly.

The doctor shook his head. "According to our time-sense, it will be thousands of years, maybe millions, before those Outside can replace their apparatus. A day or a week to them—is an age to us. Even so, how can they find an atom? No, the Universe is safe now—forever, I think."

"The cosmic ray is gone?" Marden inquired. "We're still alive, though."

"Of course. The ray only creates life. After it is created it can exist independently. Luckily the life of the atoms was transient. There was not sufficient time for them to reach a point where they could continue their life after the cosmic ray had been destroyed. It's the same old Earth, Jim."

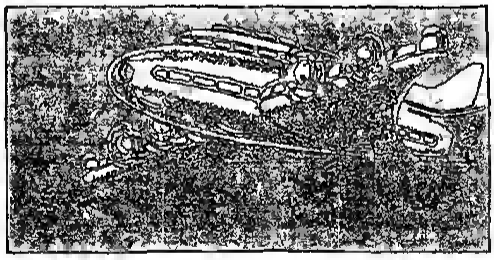
Marden didn't answer.

Kent looked up.

His nephew was very close to Lorna and she was smiling up at him. Harrison said something inaudible, then glanced at the doctor, shrugging resignedly.

Dr. Kent grinned.

"Yes," he observed with relish. "It's the same old world!"



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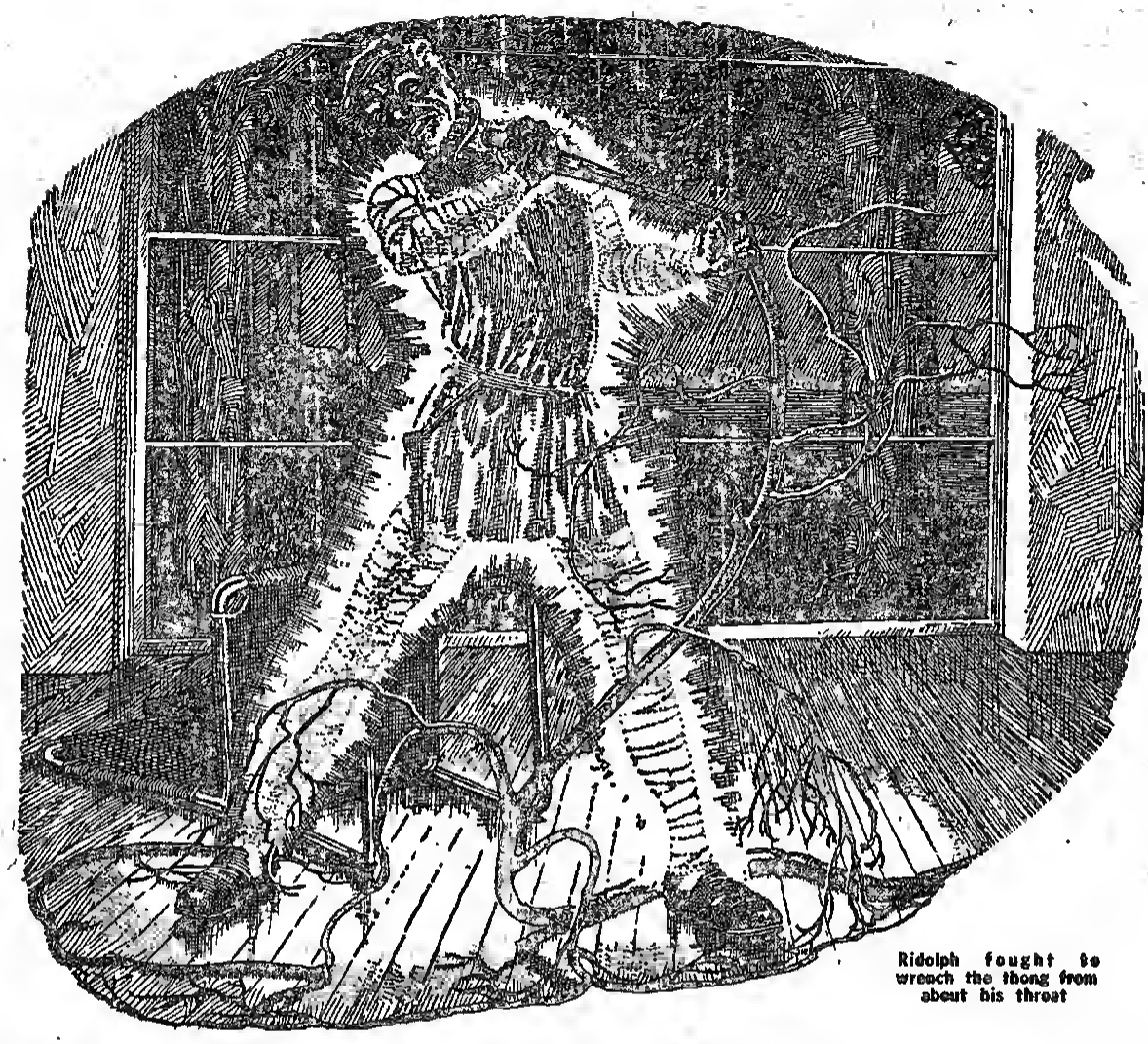

Ridolph fought to wrench the thong from about his throat

Hard Luck Diggings

By JACK VANCE

In solving a problem, I form and consider every conceivable premise. If each of these results in an impossible set of implications, except one, whose consequence is merely improbable: then that lone hypothesis, no matter how unprecedented, is necessarily the correct solution of the problem—*Magnus Ridolph.*

SUPERINTENDENT James Rogge's office occupied the top of a low knoll at Diggings A, and his office, through a semi-circular window, overlooked both diggings, A and B, all the way down to the beach and the strange-colored ocean beyond.

Rogge sat within, chair turned to the window, drumming his fingers in quick irregular tempo. Suddenly he jumped to his feet and strode across the room. He was tall and thin, and his black eyes sparkled in a face parched and bony, while his chin dished out below his mouth like a shovel-blade.

He punched a button at the telescreen, waited, leaning slightly forward, his finger

Fantastic war looms in the mines of a far-distant planet!

still holding down the button. There was no response. The screen hummed quietly, but remained ash-gray, dead.

Rogge clenched his fists. "What a demoralized outfit! Won't even answer the screen."

As he turned his back, the screen came alive. Rogge swung around, clasped his hands behind his back. "Well?"

"Sorry, Mr. Rogge, but they've just found another," panted the cadet engineer.

Rogge stiffened. "Where, this time?"

"In the shower room. He'd just been cleaning up." Rogge flung his arms out from his sides.

"How many times have I told them not to shower alone? By Deneb, I can't be everywhere! Haven't they brains enough—" A knock at the door interrupted him. A timekeeper pushed his head in.

"The mail ship's in sight, Mr. Rogge."

Rogge took a step toward the door, looked back over his shoulder.

"You attend to that, Kelly. I'm holding you responsible!"

The cadet blinked. "I can't help it if—" he began querulously, but he was speaking to the retreating back of his superior, and then the empty office. He muttered, dialed off.

ROGGE strode out on the beach. He was early, for the ship was still a black spot in the purple-blue sky. When it finally settled, fuming and hissing, on the glinting gray sand, Rogge hardly waited for the steam to billow away before stepping forward to the port.

There was a few minutes' delay while the crew released themselves from their shock-belts. Rogge shuffled his feet, fidgeting like a nervous race-horse. Metallic sounds came from within. The dogs twisted, the port opened with a sigh, and Rogge moved irritably back from the smell of hot oil, men, carbolic acid, paint.

A round, red face looked out the port.

"Hello, doc," called Rogge. "All cleared for landing?"

"Germ-free," said the red face. "Safe as Sunday school."

"Well, open 'er up!"

The flushed medico eyed Rogge with a detached bird-like curiosity. "You in a hurry?"

Rogge tilted his head, stared at the doctor, eye to eye. The red face disappeared, the port opened wider, a short plump man in blue shorts swung out on the stage, descended the ladder. He flipped a hand to Rogge.

"Hello, Julic," said Rogge, peering up past him to the open port. "Any passengers?"

"Thirteen replacements for you. Catskinners, a couple plumbers—space-sick all the way."

Rogge snorted, jerked his head. "Thirteen? Do you know I've lost thirty-three men this last month? Didn't you pick up a T. C. I. man in Starport?"

The captain looked at him sidewise. "Yes, he's aboard. Looks like you're anxious."

"Anxious!" Rogge grinned wickedly, humorlessly. "You'd be anxious yourself with two, three men strangled every day."

Captain Julic narrowed his eyes. "It's true, is it?" He looked up to the two tall cliffs that marked diggings A and B, the raw clutter of barracks and machine-shops below. "We heard rumors in Starport, but I didn't—" His voice dwindled away. Then: "Any idea at all who's doing it?"

"Not one in the world. It's a homicidal maniac, no doubt as to that, but every time I think I've got him spotted, there's another killing. The whole camp's demoralized. I can't get an honest day's work out of any man on the place. I'm a month behind schedule. I radioed the T. C. I. two weeks ago."

Captain Julic nodded toward the port. "There he is."

Rogge took a half-step forward, halted, blinked. The man descending the ladder was of medium height, medium weight, and something past middle-age. He had white hair, a small white beard, a fine straight nose.

Rogge darted a glance at Captain Julic who returned him a humorous shrug. Rogge turned back to the old man, now gazing leisurely up and down the glistening gray beach, out over the lambent white ocean.

Rogge pulled his head between his bony shoulders, stepped forward. "Ah—I'm James Rogge, superintendent," he rasped. The old man turned, and Rogge found himself looking into wide, blue eyes, clear and guileless.

"My name is Magnus Ridolph," said the old man. "I understand that you're having difficulty?"

"Yes," said Rogge. He stood back, looking Magnus Ridolph up and down. "I was expecting a man from the Intelligence Corps."

Magnus Ridolph nodded. "I happened to be passing through Starport and the Commander asked me to visit you. At the moment I'm not officially connected with the Corps, but I'll do all I can to help you."

Rogge clamped his teeth, glared out to sea. At last he turned back to Ridolph. "Here's the situation. Men are being murdered, I don't know by whom. The whole camp is demoralized. I've ordered the entire personnel to go everywhere in couples—and still they're killed!"

Magnus Ridolph looked across the beach to the hills, low rounded masses covered with glistening vegetation in all shades of black, gray and white.

"Suppose you show me around the camp."

Rogge hesitated. "Are you ready—right now? Sure you don't want to rest first?"

"I'm ready."

Rogge turned to the captain. "See you at dinner, Julic—unless you want to come around with us?"

CAPTAIN JULIC hesitated. "Just a minute, till I tell the mate I'm ashore." He clambered up the ladder.

Magnus Ridolph was gazing out at the slow-heaving, milk-white ocean that glowed as if illuminated from beneath.

"Plankton?"

Rogge nodded. "Intensely luminescent. At night the ocean shines like molten metal."

Magnus Ridolph nodded. "This is a very beautiful planet. So Earthlike and yet so strangely different in its coloring."

"That's right," said Rogge. "Whenever I look up on the hill I think of an extremely complicated steel engraving . . . the different tones of gray in the leaves."

"What, if any, is the fauna of the planet?"

"So far we've found creatures that resemble panthers, quite a few four-armed apes, and any number of rodents," Rogge said.

"No intelligent aborigines?"

Rogge shook his head. "So far as we know—no. And we've surveyed a good deal of the planet."

"How many men in the camp?"

"Eleven hundred, thereabouts," said Rogge. "Eight hundred at Diggings A, three hundred at B. It's at B where the murders occur. I'm thinking of closing down the diggings for a while."

Magnus Ridolph tugged at his beard. "Murders only at Diggings B? Have you shifted the personnel?"

Rogge nodded, glared at the massive column of ore that was Diggings B. "I've changed every man jack in the camp. And still the killings go on—in locked rooms, in the showers, the toilets, anywhere a man happens to be alone for a minute or two."

"It sounds almost as if you've disturbed an invisible *genius loci*," said Magnus Ridolph.

Rogge snorted. "If that means 'ghost,' I'll agree with you. 'Ghost' is about the only explanation I got left. Four times, now, a man has been killed in a locked room with no opening larger than a barred four-inch ventilator. We've slipped into the room with nets, screened every cubic foot. Nothing."

Captain Julic came down the ladder, joined Rogge and Magnus Ridolph. They turned up the hard-packed gray beach toward Digging A, a jut of rock breaking sharply out of the gently rolling hills.

"The ore," Rogge explained, "lies in a layer at about ground level. We're bulldozing the top-surface off onto the beach. When we're all done, that big crag will be leveled flat to the ground, and the little bay will be entirely filled."

"And Diggings B is the same proposition?" asked Magnus Ridolph. "It looks about the same formation from here."

"Yes, it's about the same. They're old volcanic necks, both of them. At B, we're pushing the fill into a low canyon in back. When we're done at B—if we ever get done—the canyon will be level full a mile back, and we'll use it for a town-site."

They climbed up from the beach on a sloping shoulder of rock. Rogge guided them toward the edge of the forest, fifty feet distant.

"I'll show you something," Rogge said. "Fruit like you've never seen before in your life." He stopped at a shiny black trunk, plucked one of the red globes that hung within an easy reach. "Try one of these." And Rogge bit into one of the soft skins himself.

Magnus Ridolph and the captain gravely followed suit.

"They are indeed very good," said the old man.

"They don't grow at B," said Rogge bitterly. "Just along this stretch here. Diggings B is the hard-luck spot of the entire project. The leopards and the apes killed men at B until we put up a charged steel fence. Here at A there's some underbrush

that keeps them out. Full of thorns."

A sound in the foliage attracted his attention. He craned his neck. "Look! There's one right now—an ape!" And Magnus Ridolph and the captain, looking where he pointed, glimpsed a monstrous black barrel, a hideous face with red eyes and a fanged mouth. The brute observed them, hissed softly, took a challenging step forward. Magnus Ridolph and the captain jerked back. Rogge laughed.

"You're safe. Watch him."

THE ape lunged nearer, then suddenly halted, with a roar. He struck out a great arm at the air, roared again. He charged forward, stopped short, howling, retreated.

Rogge threw the core of the fruit at him. "If this were at B, he'd have killed the three of us." He peered through the foliage. "Gah! Get away from here, you ugly devil!" And Rogge ducked in alarm as a length of stick hurtled past his head.

"The creature apparently has a comparatively high order of intelligence," suggested Magnus Ridolph.

"Mmph," snapped Rogge. "Well—perhaps so. We killed one at Diggings B, and two others dug a grave for him under a tree, buried him while we were watching."

Magnus Ridolph looked soberly into the forest. "I can tell you how to stop these murders."

Rogge jerked his head around. "How?"

"Survey off an area of land, in such a way that both diggings, A and B, are a mile inside the perimeter. Around the boundary erect a charged steel fence, and clear the land inside of all vegetation."

Rogge stared. "But how—" His belt radio buzzed. He flipped the switch.

"Superintendent Rogge!" came a voice.

"Yes!" barked Rogge.

"Foundry-foreman Jelson's got it!"

Rogge turned to Captain Julic and Magnus Ridolph. "Come along. I'll show you."

Ten minutes later they stood staring down at the naked body of Foreman Jelson. He had been taking a shower and his body still glistened with the wet. A red and blue bruise ringed his neck, his eyes popped, and his tongue lolled from the side of his mouth.

"We was right here, sittin' in the dressin' room," babbled a red-headed mechanic. "We didn't see a thing. Jelson went in to shower. The next thing, we heard him flop—and there he was!"

Rogge turned to Magnus Ridolph. "You see? That's what's been going on. Do you still think that building a fence will stop the murders?"

Ridolph mused, a hand at his white beard. "Tonight, if I am not mistaken, there will be a murder attempted at Diggings A."

Rogge's mouth opened slackly, then snapped shut. From behind came the sobbing breath of the red-headed mechanic.

"Diggings A? How? Why do you say that?"

"No one will be killed, I hope," said Magnus Ridolph. "Indeed if I'm wrong my theory has been founded on a non-comprehensive survey of the possibilities, there may be no attempt upon my life." He stared thoughtfully at the corpse. "Perhaps I overestimate the understanding and ability of the murderer."

Rogge turned away. "Call the medics," he snapped to the mechanic.

They rode back to Diggings A in a jeep, and Rogge took Captain Julic and Magnus Ridolph to his apartment for the evening meal.

"I could easily clear the land," he told Ridolph, "but I can't understand what you have in mind."

Magnus Ridolph smiled slowly. "I have an alternate proposal."

"And what's that?"

"Armor the necks of your personnel in steel bands."

Rogge snorted. "Then the murderer would go to smashing skulls or poisoning."

"Bashing heads, no—poisoning, possibly," said Magnus Ridolph. He reached for an enormous purple grape. "For instance, it would be an easy matter to poison the fruit."

"But why—*why!*" cried Rogge. "I've pounded my brain night after night, and all I can get is homicidal maniac."

MAGNUS RIDOLPH shook his head, smiled. "I think not. I believe that these killings have a clear, very simple purpose behind them. So simple perhaps that you overlook it."

Rogge grunted, glared at the benign countenance. "Suppose you *are* murdered tonight —then what?"

"Then you'll know that my recommendation was founded on a correct analysis of the problem, and you'll do as I suggested."

Rogge grunted again, and for a moment

there was silence.

"How long a job do you have here, Superintendent?" Magnus Ridolph asked mildly.

Rogge stared sourly out the window past the gray, black, white foliage, out to where a knife-edge horizon divided the bright white sea from the dark-blue sky. "About five years if I can keep men working. Another week of these killings, they'll break their contract."

Captain Julic chuckled. Rogge turned snapping black eyes on him.

"Already," said Captain Julic, "I've refused twenty men passage back to Starport."

"Contract-jumpers, eh?" snorted Rogge. "Just point them out to me, and I'll make them toe the mark!"

Captain Julic laughed, shook his head.

At last Magnus Ridolph rose to his feet. "If you'll show me to my quarters, I think I'll take a little rest."

Rogge pushed a button to summon the steward, quizzically eying the white-bearded sage. "You still think your life is in danger?"

"Not if I'm careful," said Magnus Ridolph coolly.

"So far there's been no killings at Diggings A."

"For an excellent reason—if my hypothesis is correct. A very manifest reason, if I may say so."

Rogge leaned back in his chair, curled his lip. "So far it has not been manifest to me, and I have been intimately concerned with the matter since we broke ground at Diggings B."

"Perhaps," said Magnus Ridolph, "you are too close to the problem. You must remember that this is not Planet Earth, and conditions—the psychological, the biological, and," he turned a vastly impassive stare at Rogge, "the essentially logical circumstances—are different from what you have been accustomed to."

He left the room. Rogge arose, paced up and down, kneading the palm of one hand with the fist of the other.

"What a pompous old goat!" he said between clenched teeth. He darted a burning glance at Captain Julic who sat quietly smiling across a glass of liqueur. "Have you ever seen anything like it? Here I've been on the job seven months now, fighting this problem night and day—and he arrives, and in one hour delivers his opinion. Have you ever heard the like? Why, I believe I'll beam Starport this very minute! I asked for an Intelligence operative, not a tourist!" He started for the door.

Captain Julic arose from his seat. "I advise you, Superintendent—" But Rogge was gone. Captain Julic followed the tall wide-pacing figure to the Communications room. He knocked at the door, and as his signal was disregarded, quietly entered.

He found Rogge barking at the screen, where the space-blurred image of the chief of the Terrestrial Intelligence Corps showed.

"—and he's gone off to bed now," Rogge was bellowing. "And all he tells me is to build a fence!"

There was a short pause, while the message raced at near-instantaneous speed to Starport and back. Rogge stood like a great snapping-turtle temporarily without its shell, frozen, glaring at the image. The loudspeaker buzzed, crackled.

"Superintendent Rogge," came the words of the Corps chief, "I earnestly advise you to follow the advice of Magnus Ridolph. In my opinion you are fortunate to have him at hand to help you."

The image faded. Rogge turned slowly, looked unseeingly past Julic.

Julic approached, tapped the rigid arm. "If you'd asked me, I could have told you the same."

Rogge wheeled. "What about this Magnus Ridolph? Who is he?"

CAPTAIN JULIC made an easy gesture. "Magnus Ridolph is an eminent mathematician."

"What's that got to do with the T.C.I.?" demanded Rogge bitterly. "Or the present case? He won't stop the killings with a slide-rule."

Captain Julic smiled. "I think he carries a slide-rule in his brain."

Rogge turned, stalked slowly from the Communications room. "How is it that the Corps commander sent him—a mathematician?"

Julic shrugged. "I imagine that he's an unofficial consultant, something of the sort."

Rogge jerked his long white fingers. "Suppose he's right? Suppose he's killed tonight?"

A steward approached, whispered in his ear. Rogge straightened up, clamped his thin lips together. "Sure. Get him anything he wants."

He and Captain Julic returned to the apartment.

After leaving Rogge, Magnus Ridolph had gone to his room, locked the door, and made a thoughtful survey of his surroundings. One wall was glass, framed on either side by the sharp gray and black foliage of two tall trees. Visible beyond was the curve of a hill down to the beach, the luminescence of the pallid ocean.

Darkness was falling, the sky deepened to a starless black, and the ocean, by contrast, shone softly bright as lamp-lit parchment.

Magnus Ridolph turned, inspected the remainder of the room. Empty, beyond all question. To the right was his couch, ahead the tiles of the bathroom glistened through an open door.

Ridolph closed the bathroom door, X-polarized the glass panels behind him, and pressed the call button for the steward.

"Bring me, quickly, please, a small power-pack, about twenty feet of glochrome wire, and three rolls of heavy insul."

The steward stared, then said, "Yes, sir," turned and closed the door.

Magnus Ridolph waited with his back to the door, looking ruminatively at the walls.

The steward presently returned. Magnus Ridolph removed his tunic, then on sudden thought, closely inspected the walls.

He donned his tunic once more, rang for the steward.

"Is there anywhere in the building a room with metal walls and a metal door?"

The steward blinked. "The refrigerator room, sir."

Magnus Ridolph nodded. "Take me there."

A short while later he returned to his room, walking stiffly, for his arms and legs were now wrapped with insul tape. He depolarized the glass wall, and in the wan light from the ocean, selected a chair, lowered himself into it, waited.

An hour passed, and Magnus Ridolph's eyelids grew heavy. He slept.

He awoke with a slight start, a sense of dissatisfaction. Were his deductions at fault? Why had not—

He stiffened, strained his ears, twisted slowly in his seat, glanced toward the bathroom. Nothing was visible. He relaxed in his chair.

Cable-like thongs snapped home—around his ankles, his chest, his throat, constricting with terrible angry strength.

Magnus Ridolph reacted instantly, fighting with primitive fright. Then the discipline of his brain took control. His big toe pressed a switch inside his shoe. Instantly up and down his arms and legs glochrome wires under his tunic burnt blue-hot, cutting the cloth like a razor, lighting the walls in the brilliance of their heat.

The bands around his arms and legs severed, Magnus Ridolph snatched a knife from his belt, slashed at the band around his neck. With the strength ebbing from his body, he hacked and hewed until he felt a pulsing along the knife, a doubt, a reluctance.

THE knife cut through, and the garrote relaxed. Magnus Ridolph gave a great gasp. Tottering, he leaned his back against the wall, staring at the reality of the murdering agency, plain before his eyes.

He rang for the steward.

"Fetch Rogge at once."

Rogge, gaunt and ungraceful, came on the lope.

"Yes, what is it?"

Magnus Ridolph pointed. "Look."

Rogge stared, then reached to the floor, lifted a length of the severed thong.

"I don't understand," he said in a husky voice.

"It is very clear," said Magnus Ridolph. "In fact, it is a logical necessity. You yourself would have arrived at the solution if you had manipulated your thoughts with any degree of order."

Rogge stared at him, anger smouldering in his eyes. "I would be obliged," he said stiffly, "if you would explain what you know of this business."

"With pleasure," said Magnus Ridolph. "In the first place, it was clear that the killings were calculated to obstruct development of Diggings B. It was not the work of a homicidal maniac for you had changed the entire personnel, and still the killings continued. I asked myself, who profited from the abandonment of Diggings B? Clearly the agency cared nothing about Diggings A, for the work progressed smoothly. Then what was the distinction between the diggings?

"At first glance, there seemed little. Both were volcanic necks, barren juts of rock, and approximately equal. About the only difference was in your projected disposition of the waste. The rubble from Diggings A was to

fill in the bay, that from Diggings B was to fill a wooded canyon. Now," and Magnus Ridolph surveyed the glowering Rogge, "do the facts presented in this light clarify the problem?"

Rogge chewed at his lips.

"I asked myself," Magnus Ridolph continued softly, "who or what suffers at Diggings B who does not suffer, or profits, at Diggings A? And the answer to my question came instantly—the trees."

"Trees!" barked Rogge.

Magnus Ridolph nodded. "I examined the situation in that light. At Diggings A the trees provided fruit and also erected for you a barrier against the beasts. There was neither fruit nor protection at Diggings B. The trees encouraged Diggings A because removing the volcanic neck and filling the bay would provide at once an added area for the growth and also removal of an obstacle to sunlight. The trees approved."

"But you are assuming intelligence in the trees?" gasped Rogge.

"Of course," said Magnus Ridolph. "What other alternative is there? I warned you not to expect on this planet the same conditions existent on Earth. You saw how the apes buried their comrade under a tree? Undoubtedly they were led to do so by the trees—persuaded, enticed, forced: that is a matter for speculation—in order that the trees might benefit by the enrichment of the soil. In any event, I reasoned that if the trees were intelligent after seven months, they very likely would comprehend human speech. In the presence of a tree I recommended that a large area of vegetation be cleared away—a wholesale murder of trees. Naturally I was marked as a threat, an individual to be removed. The attempt was made this evening."

"But how?" said Rogge. "A tree can't walk into a building and throw a rope around a man's neck!"

"No," said Magnus Ridolph. "But a tree has roots, and every room in the diggings has a drain or a ventilator, some sort of minute crevice. And I strongly suspect the presence of spy cells in the wood panels of every room—small eyes and ears. Not an action escapes the surrounding intelligences. And at this minute I suspect they are preparing to kill us both, by poison gas, possibly, or—"

A SPLINTERING crash sounded. A section of the floor broke open, and from the dark gap uncoiled a dull-brown hawser-like object. It threshed, wove, swung toward Rogge and Magnus Ridolph.

"Wait," said Magnus Ridolph calmly. "Wait. You are intelligent beings. Wait, listen to what I have to say to you."

The great root swung toward them with no pause.

"Wait," said Magnus Ridolph calmly. "There will be no clearing and all rubble will be dumped into the bay."

The root hesitated, wavered in mid-air.

"What malignant creatures!" breathed Rogge.

"Not at all," said Magnus Ridolph. "They are merely the denizens of a world defending their lives. Cooperation can be to our mutual benefit." He addressed himself to the root.

"In the future, if the trees will bar the animals from Diggings B and provide fruit at that location, men will in no way harm the trees. All waste will be transported to the ocean. In addition other men will come, discover your needs, make known our own desires. We will form a partnership beneficial to both our species. Men can irrigate and enrich sparse soils, curb insect parasites. Trees can locate minerals for man, synthesize complex organic compounds, grow him fruit." He paused a moment. The root lay flaccid on the broken floor.

"If the trees understand and approve, let the root withdraw."

The root shivered, twisted, writhed—pulled itself to the gap in the floor. It was gone.

Magnus Ridolph turned to the frozen superintendent.

"There will be no more trouble."

Rogge seemed to come awake. He glanced at the splintered floor. "But the killings? Is there to be no punishment? The torment I've gone through—"

Magnus Ridolph surveyed him with cool contempt. "Have not your men cut down many trees?"

Rogge shook his head. "There'll be an added expense taking that fill to the bay. I doubt if the diggings will pay. Why, man, with a couple incinerator tubes and a few bulldozers we could clear off the whole area—" He caught Ridolph's eye.

"In my opinion," said Magnus Ridolph, "you are short-sighted and ruthless. You also flout the law. In fact you are not a fit administrator for this project."

(Concluded on page 145)

"Marlow describes a long trip he made, in search of other people . . . ."

QUIS CUSTODIET . . . . ?

The spy Kynnastor plans to steal a great secret from a world made barren and drear by atomic bomb destruction!

Quis custodiet ipsos custodes? (Who will have custody of the custodians themselves?)—Latin tag

PARKER'S eyes glittered as he talked about those mutant-martyrs to Kynnastor.

"They know how to die in style," Parker said.

Kynnastor listened, marveling. These Formers baffled him. One couldn't make even the first step toward understanding them.

"I thought they were a bunch of cowards," he said, sustaining his role.

"Who told you that?" Parker demanded. Frowning he scratched the gray hair on his chest. "It certainly isn't true. No, they're brave, heroically brave. And it isn't the

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bravery of insensitivity and ignorance, either. The Blown-ups are quite as aware of danger as we are. They're genuinely brave. Also they're full of attributes our people always considered as virtues. They're loyal, devoted, self-sacrificing."

"They're quite a lot like us, really," Mirna said, putting her gun down in the rack. She had been out on patrol. "To look at, I mean."

"There must be ways of telling them, though," Kynnastor said reflectively.

"Oh, there are." Mirna sat down on a box and began cleaning mud from her shoes with a stick. "The chief thing, of course, is that they're all so big. The smallest one I ever saw was quite a bit bigger then Kynnastor here, and they're almost always six feet four. That's why people call them 'the Blown-ups' instead of *homo mutatus,* which would be scientifically correct. And then they have three-chambered hearts, their articulation's funny and they have phosphorescent blood. They only look like us on the surface, when you come down to it."

Kynnastor nodded. For the first time in his life he felt a degree of gratitude for the dwarfish stature which had made him unpleasantly conspicuous among his own people.

"The main differences are mental, though," Mirna went on. "I don't know what Dad means by saying they have so many virtues. They certainly aren't any too intelligent."

Parker smiled. "Mirna always over-estimates intelligence," he said teasingly. "Naturally—she has so much of it herself." And then, as the girl frowned and started to speak, "Seriously, my dear, our people in the old days considered intelligence a very dubious virtue. And *homo mutatus* isn't stupid anyhow. He's only intensely practical."

"That's just it," Mirna replied. "From everything I've ever seen or heard of them, they aren't interested in anything unless it promises immediate practical results, something to benefit them personally. That's stupid, Dad—you know it is."

Kynnastor lowered his eyes. As so often before in the days since he had attached himself to this camp of the Formers, he had the feeling that they were talking in alien tongues —using some foggy, incomprehensible language about a subject which didn't exist. Mirna said that being practical was stupid. What could she mean?

"Is that why we're fighting them?" he asked.

Both the girl and her father stared at him. There was suspicion in the man's look, and Kynnastor felt his heart speed up and seem to miss a beat. Of course there was the bomb strapped in his armpit, but he was not supposed to use it except as a last resort. It wasn't practical, at present, to destroy the Formers' camp. He was here only to gather information to take back.

"By gosh, you sound as if you'd never seen a Blown-up in your life," Parker said at last, "Have you been with humans all the time?"

"Yes, until my father died."

Parker relaxed. "That accounts for it," he said. "You have to be around them, I guess, before you understand. You've never seen one of their camps? No, I guess that's not the way to explain it to you. Well, then, have you studied history?"

Kynnastor nodded. "Yes," he said. He had, indeed, studied rather more history than was usual among his people, since it wasn't a subject they considered practical. But he felt, uneasily, that perhaps the Formers' version of history wouldn't agree with theirs.

"All right. Tell me, how did the people that were left feel after the big bombs fell?"

Kynnastor considered. "It was a great shock to them," he said.

Parker was not altogether satisfied. "That's a whale of an understatement," he replied. He opened the flap of the tent and spat out of it. "My great-great-great-great—Golly, I don't know how many 'greats' to put on it; he lived nearly three hundred years ago—anyhow this man who was one of my ancestors kept a diary. I remember reading it when I was a youngster, seven or eight years old, with the tears running down my cheeks. Marlow wasn't a literary man, but somehow he got it across.

"Those who were left felt a horrible guilt. The population of North America had been around two hundred and twenty million, and after the bombs there were about six thousand, and a lot more of them died. It's been estimated that there weren't more than five hundred thousand people left alive in the world. Five hundred thousand out of all the billions.

"But it wasn't the loss of human life that made the survivors suffer so, nor the fact that air and earth and water were still full of death, nor the naked struggle to survive. (There was nothing at all to eat, Kynnastor,

except what they could find in cans.) It was —well, Marlow writes, 'If every human being had died, it wouldn't matter so much. What does matter is that, when we blasted the whole earth, we betrayed something more important than we are. We betrayed life itself.'

"That part of the diary is funny reading," Parker went on thoughtfully, "because Marlow didn't know what was wrong with him, of course, and he thought he was going off his head. He had a long description of a trip he made in search of other people, and he speaks over and over again of the awful desolation of the country he went through, as dead and empty as Hell itself."

"Two or three times he quotes a line from some poem—'Oh happy living things! No tongue their beauty might declare!' Then he says that in the whole time since the big bombs he hasn't seen a single thing that was alive—not a moss, not a lichen, not a cricket, not an ant.

"In the end, he began to work things out. There are several pages in which he speaks of the link between sea water and the salt of tears and the salinity of the blood, where he compares the movement of sap in a plant and the circulation through the arteries and the veins. And then he comes out with it, in quite a modern-sounding way:

" 'We were the custodians, the curators of life. It was our task to treasure and to understand. If all had gone well, some day—' they were just on the edge of interplanetary travel when the big bombs fell—'some day we should have been custodians of the stars. Time will not forgive us for our failure. We will never forgive ourselves.' "

The incomprehensible passion in Parker's voice died into the air. Kynnastor remained looking down at the floor, baffled and wearied by the flow of words. At last he looked toward Mirna. There was a glint of tears in her eyes. The smoky air of the tent must have irritated them.

"There's a happy ending, though, Kyn," she said. "Tell him what the last entry in the diary is, Dad."

"Unh? Oh, that. The last words Marlow wrote were, 'Today I found a blade of grass.' "

There was a fumbling at the flap of the tent and Joe came in. He was carrying something behind his back.

"I've got something for you, Mirna," he said to the girl, smilingly. "Guess what it is."

Mirna's cheeks grew pink. (Now, why should that be? Kynnastor thought.) "I can't," she said after a moment. "Don't tease me, Joe, Give it to me."

Beaming, the young man held out his burden to the girl. It was small and squirming and odiously alive.

"It's a dog, a little dog," he said.

"A dog? You mean a real dog, like people used to have?" Mirna's voice was rough with incredulity and delight. "Where did you get it, Joe?"

"Bert found it in one of those deep shafts in the Grass Valley mines. Don't ask me how it got there. I'm afraid it's blind, though, Mirna. It walks around all right, but its eyes—her eyes—don't seem to work."

"That doesn't matter." Mirna's hands moved over the creature's fur as though they caressed something beyond all price. Her fingers were trembling. "Oh, this is wonderful!" she burst out. "Look, when the dog's grown perhaps we can find a mate for her. Joe, this is wonderful!"

The young man pulled her face back to rest against his shoulder and rubbed her cheek caressively.

"Got to go now," he announced. "I'm glad you like the dog. Number three dynamo's acting sick again."

He went out. Mirna, looking after him, sighed. "I wish he didn't have to spend so much time patching up the dynamos," she said. "He's been working on something really interesting. But there, I suppose we're lucky to have the dynamos at all. The only other human camp we've been able to talk to by radio, is near Salt Lake, has only one dynamo, and it's always out of repair. Anyhow, Kyn, do you understand about the Blown-ups now?"

"Yes." For the life of him, Kynnastor couldn't keep dubiety from showing in his tone.

"No, you don't," Mirna said, studying him so that he felt uneasy again. "Tell him about the camps, Dad."

Parker scratched at his chest. "Well, look," he said rumblingly. "At this camp—at any human camp—we do all we can to raise things, especially non-mutated stuff. They're practically sterile, of course. A grass plant won't have more than two or three seeds, and only one of them will be viable. But we do what we can with them. Even the mutated stuff is better than nothing, and we've got a good bit of it around, though to

me it all looks alike. I can't tell one kind of big blistered leaf from another. But it's green, and alive.

"It's the same way with animals. Bart has a blindworm in a box he's feeding, and Alice has a horned toad, and Sam has a blue legless lizard, and so on. In the days before the bombs they wouldn't have amounted to much, but to us they're wonderful."

"The Blown-ups' camps haven't anything. They live off synthetic foodstuffs, and whatever they find alive, they kill. It isn't aggressiveness, or even a pleasure in destroying, the way it was in the old days with our people who liked hunting. The hunters might kill animals, but they wanted the species to be alive. The Blown-ups kill because they don't want anything to be alive.

"They always make their camps in the middle of one of the sand-glass areas—and do you know what they do? I guess you'll find this hard to believe, since you've been with humans all your life. But they send out men with flame-throwers twice a month and they go over an area half a mile or so wide around the camp with them. With flame-throwers, Kynnastor, so that the sand won't ever be anything else but dead. The Blown-ups love death. *That's* why we're fighting them."

Still holding the dog cuddled under one arm, Mirna rose to her feet. "I've got to get over to the shop and get to work before dark," she said. "You've asked several times about what I'm doing, Kyn. Do you want to come and see?" She picked up her gun.

Rigid with suspicion, Kynnastor followed her. It was impossible that so carelessly, so casually, Mirna was about to show him the new weapon the Formers were rumored to be working on. It must be a trap.

The shop was the only permanent substantial building in the camp. It was built out of glassy green slag, held together with lead dowels. Somebody had put a lot of work in on it. Mirna pushed open the door with the elbow of the arm in which she was carrying the dog, and led Kynnastor down a corridor.

"They let me have this room for a lab," Mirna said, stretching up to turn on the light. "Joe's got the one next door for his stuff. Look down there, by the window. There, what do you think of it?"

Kynnastor looked in the direction she indicated and grew sick. One could be surprised at nothing the Formers did, not even when a weapon they were rumored to be working on was no weapon at all, but a hairy-leaved, greenish-yellow plant. But how disgusting they were, how perverse, how (the epithet came into his mind unbidden) dirt-devouring. A *plant!*

"What is it?" he asked, forcing warmth into his voice.

"It's a tomato," Mirna answered pridefully. "A tomato plant. The first one anybody has seen in three hundred years. I checked with an old botany book, and there's no doubt of it. *Lycopersicum esculentum.* A genuine tomato plant!" She shifted her gun to the arm that held the puppy and bent over the leaves. "I thought this morning I noticed—wait now—yes, it is, yes. One, two, three, four. . . . Kyn, it's setting fruit!"

Kynnastor swallowed. "How did you get it?" he asked. "Did Joe find the seeds?"

Mirna shook her head. Her cheeks were pink and her eyes shone. "No, not that. I made it myself."

"*Made* it?"

"Well, in a way. A simple process, but a tedious one. Do you want to hear about it?"

"Yes, of course I do."

"Well, about five years ago I took a leaf cutting from a mutated plant near Yuba City. I grew it in a normal nutrient solution for a couple of months. You understand I didn't grow a new plant from it—I only increased the area of leaf tissue. Then I took a cutting from the original cutting, changed the solution for a fresh batch, and grew my new cutting on. After I'd been doing this for about a year, I grew a whole new plant from the leaf. It wasn't a normal plant, by any means, but it had lost one or two of its mutated characters, so I kept on with the experiment. It took four more years but you see what I got."

"That's wonderful," Kynnastor replied. He did indeed wonder at her.

"Oh, I don't know," Mirna answered with a touch of discontent. Her dark brows grew together in a frown. "It's nothing basic, just a technique. Of course, techniques can be useful sometimes. The main trouble with this one is that it's so slow. Think how long it would take to reconstitute just one member of all the genera we used to have, even if we assume that they've survived in a mutated form. And they have not. No, the stuff that Joe's working on looks lots more promising."

Kynnastor grew alert. "What's that?" he asked.

"He's been working with radioactive po-

tassium. One of his biggest difficulties is that the materials he needs are so hard for us to get. His apparatus isn't over three inches long, because he couldn't get enough cadmium and so on to allow him to make it bigger. But anyhow, when he treats mutated plant material with it, the germ cells mutate again. And the mutations are always lethal. It causes a disintegration of the chromosomes. And the funny thing is that it has absolutely no effect an non-mutated material."

Kynnastor nodded doubtfully. The confusion in his mind was pushing him toward utterance. Even if one accepted the Formers' premise that life was somehow desirable, Mirna's evaluation of Joe's work was not logical.

"How is it promising?" he asked after a second. "You don't want to destroy the mutated plants, do you? And that's all his apparatus does."

"Of course we don't," Mirna replied. "But he's got something basic, something with possibilities. It's something new. She waved her hand at the microscope, the carboys of solution, the plants growing in stoppered flasks— "In work like ours, you mustn't ask what anything's good for. It may be desirable or it may not. That's not the point. Our job is only to find out what it is."

Kynnastor nodded again. He had reached a decision which pleased him. He thought the shop was unguarded at night, but even if it were not, a guard should not present too much difficulty. He would set the bomb he had been carrying in his armpit to explode in Mirna's laboratory, and Joe's apparatus, obviously so portable, would go back with him to his own people.

It would not matter that Kynnastor would be going beyond what he had been sent to do. Blowing up the laboratory was a practical, sensible thing, and since Mirna set so high a value on Joe's apparatus, taking it would be wise in any case. It might be useful besides. It might be more practical than the flamethrowers for keeping the area around the camp clean of life. Tonight, he thought. Yes, tonight!

"My arm's tired," Mirna said. She put the dog down on one of the long tables and stood rubbing her arm. "I wonder what it was like in the old days," she said thoughtfully, "when every place where there was soil, something grew. I've read about it in books and tried and tried to imagine it. Plants grew everywhere, in the sand beside the ocean and on the tops of mountain peaks. They even had plants they didn't want, called weeds. There were fields of wheat and fruit trees and vines that they cultivated, and even in the cities there were parks with flowers and trees. It must have been wonderful! But anyhow, today's an important day. It's the day the tomato plant fruited. It's the day we found the dog."

She ruffled up the puppy's fur and it began wriggling and licking her hand. For a strange, dizzying moment Kynnastor found himself looking through Mirna's eyes. For that instant a dog was a priceless, a marvelous thing, and a tomato plant opulence, riches unspeakable. Involuntarily he put out his hand to the creature and it licked his fingertips.

The warm, wet tongue made him feel sick. Slowly, so that Mirna should not notice it, he began to draw away his hand. The puppy sniffed inquiringly at his fingers and began to growl, softly, and then with genuine ferocity. It slashed at him with its tiny, needle-sharp teeth.

"You awful little dog!" Mirna exclaimed, picking the puppy up and shaking it. "Did she hurt you, Kyn? I'm so sorry. I'll go get a bandage for the cut."

Blood was dripping from his finger to the floor. "Don't bother," Kynnastor said hastily. "It's nothing, Mirna, nothing at all."

"Oh, you've got to bave it bandaged." She moved so that she stood between him and the door and her shadow fell upon the spots of blood. "I'm so sorry. I—" She stopped. She was staring down at the phosphorescent blood.

Her gun was at his breast instantly. Without turning her head she shouted, "Joe! Dad! I've got a spy!"

They stripped him naked and searched his clothing and his body with great thoroughness. The bomb in his armpit they found at once.

"Kill him," Parker advised disgustedly. "A Blown-up," he said. "I'll be hanged! Look at the way his hip-joints work. I dido't know Blown-ups came that small."

"I don't think this one is typical," Mirna replied absently. Her gun was trained on Kynnastor uowaveringly, but she seemed to be thinking of other things.

"I've got a better idea than that," Joe said. He lowered his voice so that Kynnastor should not hear.

"We'll keep him prisoner for a couple of months. During that time I build another projector, the smallest I can. I think I can get it down to about seven-eighths of an inch. Then we put it in a capsule, anesthetize him, and bury the capsule in the fatty tissue of his back. We can make another incision at the same time so he'll think we were experimenting on him. Then we let him escape and go back to his home camp, and we can power the projector by brachywave."

"I get it," Parker said enthusiastically. "It's a first-class idea. The germ cells in every Blown-up that gets near him will mutate lethally, and they're always visiting each other's camps. With any luck, it'll sterilize the whole bunch of them. A fine idea! Keep on covering him, Mirna, while we tie him up."

"No," Mirna said.

Her voice was authority. Parker looked at her. "Why not?" he said.

"We need them too much," Mirna answered soberly.

"Need them?" Parker was outraged. "Mirna, you're out of your head. Need them? The blasting, sand-loving murderers! All they can do is kill. They don't belong on the same planet with us."

"We need them, though." Mirna paused and seemed to hunt for words. "How long is it since the big bombs fell?" she asked at last. "Nine human generations, three hundred years. It isn't long enough. We haven't learned it yet."

"Learned what?" Joe said.

"That we're the custodians. Without the Blown-ups, we might forget. Don't you see? It's a lesson we've only begun to learn."

"We've learned it," Parker stated positively. "The big bombs blew the old bases of our culture sky-high. We've changed. We don't see or feel things the way people used to. We could never go back to the old ways."

"I'm afraid we could," Mirna said. "There were thousands of human generations before the bombs, and none of them understood it the way we do. Long before the bombs our people chopped down the forests and left burned-over stumps where the trees used to stand. They plowed up the grasslands and made deserts out of them. They tore the heart out of the continents and sent it floating down in the muddy water of the rivers to lie at the bottom of the sea. The bombs only finished something that had been long ago begun.

"Earth's done for. We destroyed it. But we won't always be on earth. Some day we'll visit the other worlds. And then we'll have a chance, again, to be custodians."

"Mirna's right about that, of course," Joe said. "There isn't a human being alive now who doesn't think so too. But what have the Blown-ups got to do with it?"

"We think so now because the Blown-ups are alive. They print it in letters so big that we can't help but read." Mirna's voice was soft.

"We're the custodians. But who's to see that we're faithful, that we don't betray our task? The Blown-ups are our opposites, the magnet's other pole. Maybe some day we won't need them any more. Until then, they teach us. Until then—don't you see, Joe?—they're *our* custodians."

Joe made a noise in his throat. "It's too big a chance to take," he said. "Maybe Mirna's right—listening to her I almost think she is. But before that time she's speaking of comes, if it ever does, the Blown-ups may have wiped us out. Wiped us out, and every other living thing. It's too big a chance."

"It's a chance we have to take." Mirna's voice was as level as her eyes. "Let him go."

* * * * *

Half wading through, half sliding over, the sand-glass slopes as he approached his people's camp, Kynnastor wondered briefly why the Formers had let him go. (How beautiful, how grateful to the eye the sand-glass was, in its wonderful lifeless purity.) It was illogical, surely, to release a spy.

His eyes caught a minute flicker of green to his left that the flame-throwers must have missed. He ground it down with his heel and kicked sand over it. Yes, it was illogical. But then, so was everything the Formers did.

NEXT ISSUE'S FEATURED NOVEL

WHAT MAD UNIVERSE

By FREDRIC BROWN

The room was filled with a whirling, chaotic, whistling force

PERFECT SERVANT

by Walt Sheldon

Tobor, the ideal robot flunkey and yes-man, came out of the future—and did everything his master wanted, until . . .

THE LITTLE man had the look of one who has met guards, clerks, secretaries—and outwitted them. Here he stood, in Mr. Jonathan Gamble's slick, gleaming office.

"All I'm asking, sir, is that you try me." His voice had an even, dry timbre which was oddly soothing. He was remarkably short—shorter than Mr. Gamble—and his large, freckled head looked like an inverted, sun-ripened pear. It seemed to float atop narrow shoulders. "I know you're dissatisfied with your assistants, sir. But, I, sir, if you'll pardon me, I might be described as the perfect servant."

Mr. Gamble leaned forward. He folded

plump, well-manicured hands on the desk.

"I got all kinds of trouble," he said. "In Vienna I make my reputation on musicals. So I come to Hollywood. So what do they give me? An *epic*. About the future, yet. The story they get from a magazine called *Atomic Space Fiction*. I can't even understand it. It opens in a laboratory. How do I know if the laboratory Soumazowsky, my technical adviser, builds is authentic? Before I read the treatment I am thinking a laboratory is a gentleman's lounge."

"Yes, sir, I appreciate that," said the little man, "but—"

"So I've got all these troubles," said Mr. Gamble patiently. "So will you please go get lost—and not add to them?"

The telephone rang. The little man shifted from one foot to another. Mr. Gamble brought the cream colored instrument to his cheek and growled, "Hello!"

Then his expression softened.

"Oh, hello, Sweetie-Cake," he said. "No, not now. I'm busy. See you at the fights tonigbt, Sugar Dumpling."

HE HUNG up, cleared his throat, fidgeted a little, then glared at the little man with the big head.

"Give me *one* assignment," pleaded the little man. "Ask for something. Anything. Ask for something impossible. I guarantee to find it for you."

Mr. Gamble sighed. He spread his hands. "All right," he said. "All right." This would be one way to get rid of the pest. Hollywood was full of pests. And incompetents. None of them could ever believe—could ever comprehend—that Mr. Jonathan Gamble was one of the world's really intelligent, able men. He'd thought, years ago, that he'd find real happiness in Hollywood, where things were done right. But no. He, Mr. Gamble, was still looking for something to fill a void in his soul and, to tell the truth, he no longer was sure just exactly what it was he was looking for. He slapped his palms on the desk top.

"Bring me Frederick the Great's flute," he said.

"Yes, sir," snapped the little man enthusiastically. He never batted an eye. He executed a short bow, turned, made the door in several swift, even steps, and then he was gone.

Mr. Gamble looked at the card tbe little man had left. The odd type-face looked something like Greek lettering, but it was infinitely more modern. It occurred to Mr. Gamble that it might be a good style to use for the opening title of his present opus, which was called, rather all-embracingly, "SPACE!"

He noticed only vaguely that the little man's name was A. A. Tobor and that in smaller type beneath the name it said simply, *Consultant*.

And then Mr. Gamble, forever the executive, shrugged, forgot about Mr. Tobor, and went on to the next problem. He pressed the buzzer marked Technical Adviser.

Moments later a thin party in a white coat came into the producer's inner sanctum. He had hungry cheeks and deep, serious eyes. He wore a constant air of not listening.

"Mr. Soumazowsky," said Mr. Gamble portentously, "I have seen the set for Ektar's home."

"Living machine, sir," corrected Soumazowsky. "In five thousand A. D. people will all live in living machines."

"All right—whatever you call it!" Mr. Gamble slapped the desk again. "So, according to the script, this Ektar is supposed to be a big shot in the Combined Nations Department of Science. So what kind of a house—living machine—does he have? Plain walls, cheap water colors. Built-in furniture that is pure borax from a schlak joint. What happens to the reputation of my pictures with a set like this? The guy is important. Where is the expensive Chippendale? The Persian rugs, where are they? We are paying an interior decorator twenty-five thousand a year. Why don't you consult him?"

Soumazowsky sighed. He looked out of the window as he spoke. "In five thousand A. D. public taste will have become sufficiently refined so that excellent water colors will be appreciated—particularly by a man like Ektar—more than opulent, but bad oils. Furniture, or living machine accessories, as they will be called, will be simple, utilitarian. Pleasure will be derived from spiritual resources, not glittering physical possessions."

Mr. Gamble squinted a suspicious eye. "You talk like one of the writers. Soumazowsky, have you had your loyalty checked yet?"

"Yes, sir," said Soumazowsky, in a detached voice. "If you'll recall the report, it

pointed out that my great, great grandfather fought in the American Revolution."

"*Hm,*" said Mr. Gamble. "Well, just the same, Ektar's joint has got to be changed. Now we come to another thing. This time machine."

FOR THE FIRST time Soumazowsky looked directly at the producer. There was a touch of defiance in his deep, brown eyes. "What sir, is wrong with tbe time machine?"

Mr. Gamble slapped *both* palms to the desk, and leaned far back in his bleached leather swivel chair. He took a photograph from a pile on his desk and shoved it toward the scientist. "You ask me what is wrong with this time machine? Look at it!"

The picture showed a box about the size of a portable radio. It had two dials and several small switches.

"This!" said Mr. Gamble. "This to picture patrons says time machine?" He shook his head. "This to picture patrons says nothing! How can they believe that Ektar goes from the Fifty-first to the Twentieth Century by a little thing like this?"

Soumazowsky licked dry lips. He threw his shoulders back. "Mr. Gamble, I have no need to reiterate my reputation as a scientist. On the strength of it, you hired me as a technical adviser. But I would like you to know that for many years, in secret, I have actually been working upon the problem of a time machine. I daresay I know more about the subject than anyone in the country. You must believe me when I tell you that this tiny box is the nearest thing to a time machine existing so far. I have already had results from it which, although not conclusive, convince me that I am on the right track."

"A little thing like this?" Mr. Gamble's voice dripped with doubt.

"Yes," said Soumazowsky. His smile was a little sad. "We know that time is a dimension, having constant, predictable behavior. Störmer, Lemaitre and Vallarta showed that cosmic rays—cbarged particles, we believe—penetrate the earth's magnetic field at varying time rates. We speak of slow and fast particles.

"At sea level we find one slow particle to two fast particles. At two and a half miles above sea level the ratio is one to one. But slightly underground, or under water, fast particles can abound in a ratio as high as nine to one. This puzzled science for years. The one salient fact escaped investigators.

"The size and mass of tbese cosmic particles is not, in the ordinary sense, destructible, that is to say they are not translated by friction, or other forces, into heat or common energy. However, when these particles encounter resistance, *something* must change. What? Tbe time dimension, of course. It's the only one left.

"The time dimension they bear originally takes the form of energy. Their time changes. The particles below earth and water are literally of a different time than the present. Obviously, that suggests reversing the precedure and translating energy into time.

"Now, the energy in my time-oscillator is derived from a sixty-cycle, one-hundred-ten-volt alternating current, found in any baseboard socket. Thus—"

"Enough!" shouted Mr. Gamble, slapping palms, forearms, and elbows, too, on the desk. "Time—oscillators—particles—about all this I don't care. But for the love scene I've got to have a time machine at least two stories bigh and a hundred feet wide. That, Mr. Soumazowsky, is an order!"

Soumazowsky looked back quietly and evenly. "If my salary weren't paying for some very important experiments, I'd—"

Mr. Gamble never learned what he would have done. The telephone rang again. He picked it up, answered, then said:

"Oh, hello, Sweetie Cake. No, I'm not busy now." He waved Mr. Soumazowsky out of the room.

LATER, when the door opened softly, Mr. Gamble was still listening to the simpering, slightly squeaky female voice in the telephone receiver. He had a fatuous expression on his face. He looked up at the ceiling and allowed Sweetie Cake to ramble on. She was a nice, sincere kid. Dumb, but gorgeous. On his arm she looked like a million dollars at Grauman's, the Derby, the Bowl.

The Russian sable coat he'd bought her helped, of course. Even so, at times she awakened in Mr. Gamble's disturbed psyche a desire to marry and settle down and really own outright such a gorgeous possession as Sweetie Cake. But he wasn't quite sure whether *that* was what he was looking for, either.

He became aware that someone else was

in the room, looked down from the ceiling, and saw the narrow shoulders and big head of Mr. A. A. Tobor before his desk.

Mr. Gamble frowned. "Call me back, almond bun," he told the 'phone. "I got a conference." He hung up abruptly. "Tobor, I thought I told you to—"

"You asked me to bring you Frederick the Great's flute, sir," said Tobor in his pleasant, mechanical voice. He held up a flute. "Here it is."

"Tobor!" A cloud darkened over Mr. Gamble's plump brow. "You think you can fool me with such trap-clap? An old second hand flute like that can't be the McCoy."

"Oh, it's been checked, sir. I took it to the research department. Professor Hindengrus there is an expert on the period."

Mr. Gamble was a man of action. He pressed the button marked Research Department.

"Hindengrus," answered a scratchy voice.

"Hindengrus," Mr. Gamble leaned toward the annunciator, "did a little guy named Tobor—"

"Oh, yes—Tobor. I was just going to call you about that, Mr. Gamble. Most remarkable thing I've ever seen. Museums the world over have been looking for years for the one flute missing from Frederick the Great's collection. It's genuine, all right. How in the world did he ever find it?"

"Thank you, Hindengrus," said Mr. Gamble, a trifle shakily. He looked up at Tobor. Tobor was smiling in a fixed way. "Pretty good, Mr. Tobor," said the producer. "Pretty good. Gives me a terrific idea for a musical. Frederick the Great has got this girl who sings—sort of a Deanna Durbin type, see—only he can't marry her because she's a commoner."

Tobor cleared his throat respectfully. "Do I get a job, sir?"

Mr. Gamble beamed. "Of course you do, Tobor. Absolutely. Assistant producer, by golly. You're too high-class for a prop man. I pride myself, Tobor, on my ability to pick people. This is the secret of executive talent."

"Thank you, sir," said Tobor. He leaned forward eagerly. "Have you got another assignment for me?"

"Have I? I'll say I have!" Mr. Gamble nodded. He turned his eye toward the glossy photo of Soumazowsky's time machine. He started to say, "Bring me a time mach—"

The telephone rang.

It was Sweetie Cake again.

"Yes, love," said Mr. Gamble. "We *are* going to the fights tonight. That I already told you." He looked up from the 'phone and waved for Tobor to depart. Tobor inclined his head in a slight bow, and then went out of the door.

LATER, Mr. Gamble sat before a movieola and concentrated on the latest rushes of the epic, "SPACE!" They had been quickly printed so that Mr. Gamble might more speedily decide which scenes to reshoot. Time was money, he reflected. There was an argument for Soumazowsky's double talk. Time was money. It was that simple.

The film flopped merrily through the little machine. He regarded the large lens-screen in the top and followed the action. He worked the motor with a foot pedal, stopping it every once in a while to rip out a bit of film, then put the remaining ends together in an electric splice welder. Some of the extracted strips he hung on numbered pegs for later contemplation.

He made notes.

Carnivorous garden scene too slow. Speed up by angle shots, more mood stuff.

Cut lap dissolve where Ektar appears at big window in castle of Lords of Infinity. Make quick flash showing Ektar takes only five minutes for journey.

Medium, not Big Close-Up on Jonqua in hypnosis scene. Anodes on temple look fake in B. C. U.

Cutting film, Mr. Gamble felt a strange happiness. He was good at his craft, and he knew it. This was the nearest he'd ever come to whatever mysterious, elusive thing he was looking for.

A scraping footstep behind him interrupted his quiet ecstasy.

"Tobor!" he said, turning and seeing the little man with the big head. "How did *you* get in here?"

Tobor merely smiled in reply. "I've got it, sir," he said. "It was a little more difficult than the flute, but I got it."

"You got what?" asked Mr. Gamble.

"What you asked for," said Tobor. He held up a splinter of wood tipped by a red and green coating. "A time match."

"*A time match*? Are you crazy? This isn't what I asked for!"

"I was certain I heard aright, sir." Tobor cocked his oversized head and looked wor-

ried. "Just before the telephone rang you said to bring you a time match."

Dawn came to Mr. Gamble. "No, that wasn't it. I started to say a time *machine*. Then the phone rang." He brought his head up suddenly. "So what is a time match?"

"Oh, it's quite genuine," said Tobor, handing it to him. "You simply strike it."

Mr. Gamble frowned, took the match, then went to the door of the cutting room and stepped into the corridor, away from the inflammable film. Tobor came along several steps behind. Mr. Gamble looked at the head of the match, then at Tobor, then back at the head of the match again. He shrugged and struck it on the wall.

It seemed to Mr. Jonathan Gamble that he was abruptly in the center of a vast explosion, only in this particular explosion there was no noise, only great fields of force pushing away from the center, and swift, swirling kaleidoscopic patterns, patterns which he thought, rather than saw. The sensation lasted less than a second.

Mr. Gamble looked about him and saw that he was in the sunshine. He was walking across the lot from the production building to the executive cottage, and Tobor was smilingly striding beside him.

Mr. Gamble stopped and grabbed Tobor's arm. "What—what happened? How did I get here?"

"The time match, sir," said Tobor easily. "Don't you remember? You struck it."

MR. GAMBLE put his wrist to his forehead. He felt dizzy. "So I struck it. But what happened?"

"It burned up a little time," smiled Tobor. He looked at his wrist watch. "About twenty minutes, I believe, sir. Yes, it's now twenty minutes later. And this is where you were destined to be twenty minutes after you'd finished your film cutting."

Mr. Gamble was pale. He shook. He put both plump hands on Tobor's shoulders and looked directly into his eyes. He noticed for the first time that Tobor's eyes were adamantine, almost metallic, and that they lacked some indefinable warmth, some feeling of life, or something. It made Mr. Gamble shake even a little more.

"Listen, Tobor," he said, "Don't ever bring around one of those time matches again. Is that clear?"

"Why, very well, sir," said Tobor. "Whatever you say." He straightened a little and looked suddenly eager again. "What *would* you like this time, sir?"

Mr. Gamble stepped back and put his hands on his hips. He regarded the strange little man thoughtfully.

"Should I do it?" he said, aloud.

"Do what, sir?"

"Er, never mind. I'll do it." Mr. Gamble waved his fingers, dismissing the peculiar, instinctive doubt which had tugged at his consciousness. His mind went back over the rushes of the scene where Ektar appeared at the castle of the Lords of Infinity. The castle's main window was supposed to lead into a space warp—the whole plot depended on that, because that was how, later, Ektar made his escape; by turning his force-field prison into a space warp. But that window had looked just slightly phony. It didn't give the impression of a space-warp window at all. Tobor would bring him a *real* window.

"Look, Tobor," Mr. Gamble began, "bring me a wind—"

A shrill, girlish scream of delight floated across the sunny lot. Mr. Gamble heard the tattoo of high heels on the cement sidewalk, turned, and saw a lovely thing in a silken slack suit come toward him, waving.

"Johnny-boy!" she chortled, "Hello, Johnny-boy!"

"Marzipan girl!" said Mr. Gamble sternly. "How many times do I have to tell you that you shouldn't be coming here on the lot!"

"But, Johnny-boy, I just had to." She was blond, clear-complexioned, compact, and altogether fairly breathtaking. "I just saw the cutest convertible down on Figueroa Street."

Mr. Gamble's lips came together hard. He drew a deep breath. He noticed from the corner of his eye that Tobor was still standing beside him. Absently he flicked a finger at the little man and said, "I'll see you later. I got to fight for my bank balance right now." He took Sweetie Cake by the arm and steered her toward the executive cottage.

It was near quitting time. Mr. Gamble's check book, if anything, was in greater jeopardy than before. He sat in his bleached leather swivel chair, and Sweetie Cake perched happily on his lap, running her siren red nails through what hair he still retained.

Two scotch highballs were on the desk.

"Look, strudel-paste," Mr. Gamble was saying. "Already you've got a villa in Carmel. Why should you have also a mission in La Jolla?"

"But, Jonny-boy, little Sweetie Cake gets lonesome shut up all day with nothing but an Afghan for company. Anyway, didn't your psychiatrist tell you that a person needs variety?"

"Variety, yes," sighed Mr. Gamble. "But not all of the real estate west of the Mississippi—"

THE door burst open. Sweetie Cake spilled herself in confusion from Mr. Gamble's lap. She knocked one of the highballs over. Mr. Gamble popped from his chair and drew himself to an angry, looming five-feet-four. He glared at the door.

Soumazowsky stood there in his white coat, looking hungry and detached as usual.

"Sorry to break in," he said. "It's an emergency."

"*You* got an emergency," said Mr. Gamble. "What do you think I got here?"

Soumazowsky went on quietly, as though Mr. Gamble hadn't spoken. "Someone's been tampering with the time machine. It's actually been working. There's a strange substance on the table beside it that defies description. Later I'll look into that—but right now the entire lot is in danger. The synthetic cosmic rays are emanating from the circuit, flooding the area. There's no telling what might happen. It may even create a space-warp."

"Then bust the darned thing," said Mr. Gamble. "Blow it up. Don't come asking me foolish questions."

"Well, I have taken steps to destroy it," Soumazowsky admitted, "but the virus-crystal is doing the dirty work. And we can only destroy that by passing through it a current whose frequency varies times the sine of two pi, times the—"

"Then *do* it. Don't stand there."

"Well, it requires a frequency modulation transmitter. I thought if *you* made the request to one of the radio stations, they might help us."

"All right, all right," said Mr. Gamble, throwing his open palms to the air. "You shouldn't have let anybody fool with the thing."

"But this wasn't an outside job. My opinion is that some form of intelligent life has actually projected itself from the future into our own time-space zone. It may be running around the lot now, for all I know."

"That," said Mr. Gamble, lowering an eyebrow, "I find hard to believe."

Soumazowsky shrugged.

Sweetie Cake stepped quietly to a corner while Mr. Gamble picked up the telephone and made the necessary arrangements with an F.M. station in the city. When it was done he put the 'phone down and semaphored a finger at the scientist.

"Not a word, now, about all this to anybody. They'll either think we're crazy, or doing illegal research: For the studio that would be very bad."

"The studio," said Soumazowsky quietly, "can go take a flying leap. I'm on the verge of the biggest thing since the wheel. And from now on I'm spending all my time on it."

Mr. Gamble stared back for a moment. Then he delivered terrible palm punishment to the desk top.

"Okay. Okay," be said. "It's your funeral. I'll get a real scientist, anyway. I'll get Einstein, himself. I'll make him famous. So beat it out of here and don't show your face on the lot again, Mr. Soumazowsky!"

This time Soumazowsky's shrug was a masterpiece of indifference.

He turned to go.

Once more the door opened and A. A. Tobor stepped into the room. The little man was beaming happily and his steps across the carpet to the front of Mr. Gamble's desk were quick, joyous ones. He held his hands cupped in front of him.

"I found one!" he said.

"Found what?" asked Mr. Gamble.

"A wind. An excellent wind, sir."

MR. GAMBLE suddenly remembered his interrupted request for a window. He groaned. He stood up quickly. He put his hands out.

"No—" he said.

It was too late. Tobor opened his fingers and the room was immediately filled with a whirling, chaotic, whistling force that uprooted papers, knocked over lamps, shattered the panes, curled the rugs, tore Sweetie Cake's silken jacket, sent Mr. Gamble tumbling backwards, dropped pictures from the wall, and toppled a heavy file cabinet.

There was a dazed moment. Tobor stood in the same spot, beaming happily, and Soumazowsky, sprawled in a corner, stared

with a queer apprehension at the little, big headed man.

Mr. Gamble picked himself up.

"You—Tobor!" he screamed. "Get out of here! Beat it! You, and this—this cheap mechanic, too! You're all fired!"

"Don't you want anything else, sir?" asked Tobor mildly.

"Get out!" roared Mr. Gamble. "From you I want nothing!"

"Oh, that's easy, sir," Tobor smiled. He about-faced smartly and slipped through the door.

Mr. Gamble turned to Soumazowsky. Mr. Gamble was tremhling. "So that's one screwball I'm rid of! Now, if *you'll* kindly hoof it, Soumazowsky."

"Wait a minute," the scientist said. His hollow cheeks were working in and out and his brow was thoughtfully pleated. "This fellow, Tobor—where did he come from?"

"How do I know? He's a perfect servant, he says. He brings me Frederick the Great's flute, and a time match, or something. He's *too* good. Please beat it, Soumazowsky. I got enough trouble."

"Gamble," said the technical adviser, "I can't go without leaving you this warning. Be careful of that Tobor. I may be wrong, of course, but it's just occurred to me what he may be. Simple deduction. Suppose Tobor isn't human, a mechanical perfect servant from a future time. Suppose he left that time when my machine created the necessary schism—left it because things were too perfect, and there wasn't any real need for a perfect servant. His creators would have built an urge into him, of course—a synthetic compulsion that required constant fulfillment on his intended purpose. Suppose that—"

"Soumazowsky!" yelled Mr. Gamble. "*Get lost!*"

A half hour later Mr. Jonathan Gamble was still at his desk. His chubby elbows were on the glass top and his jowls were in warm, moist palms. He stared at the gold-framed photograph of Sweetie Cake, and sighed. She wasn't a bad kid, really. She left readily enough when he told her he had to be alone. But Sweetie Cake wasn't what he wanted out of life.

He lifted his head and looked about him at the opulent, tastefully decorated office. The attendants had managed to put it in order again. Many men dreamed of working in an office like it. But this wasn't what Mr. Gamble wanted, either.

He looked at the fat shooting script of "SPACE!" which lay on his desk. When he was able to immerse himself completely in the details of picture-making he achieved a measure of content. Yet always, sooner or later, something would arise to stir the deep-rooted doubts Mr. Gamble had about his own ability.

Maybe he should have been a tailor in Vienna, like his father had wanted. That seemed so long ago. So long ago and so unreal that now he couldn't really say whether or not that actually would have made him happy.

THE telephone bell intruded. Mr. Gamble uncradled the cream colored instrument. "Hello?"

"Jonathan?" Sweetie Cake's voice was queerly calm—matter-of-fact.

"What is it now?" he asked. "I thought you weren't going to bother me."

"But this is too. too important, Jonathan. I can't go to the fights with you tonight."

"So why not?"

"Because I'm in love."

"You're—*what?* Are you crazy?"

"A little, I guess," sighed Sweetie Cake. "And it's mad but wonderful. It's Mr. Soumazowsky, Jonathan. He's *so* terribly intellectual."

"Look, you little dope," said Mr. Gamble, "Soumazowsky would get tired of your B.B. brain before you could—"

"It was fun, Jonathan, while it lasted," said Sweetie Cake. "Don't think too harshly of me. Good-by."

The receiver clicked.

Mr. Gamble stared at it stupidly. He was all mixed up inside. He couldn't figure out whether or not he really cared.

The office door opened softly.

"Hello, Mr. Gamhle," said Tobor, in his quiet, expressionless voice.

Mr. Gamble looked blankly at the little man.

"I brought it." Tobor said.

"Huh?" said Mr. Gamble.

Tobor advanced toward the desk with singular, gliding steps. There was a kind of light—the nearest thing to human warmth Mr. Gamble recalled—in his polished eyes. He had something under his coat, holding it there.

"This was tougher than I thought," Tobor said. "Sorry I took so long, sir."

Mr. Gamble seemed to wake up a little. "Tobor, please. No flutes. No time matches. No wind. I told you—from you I want nothing."

"That, sir," said the little man with the big head, "is exactly what I've brought you!"

He opened his coat.

The room was suddenly filled with space. Vast space. On all sides were the ends of time, and the sound of it was like a great symphony.

Ten to the tenth power violins played in beautiful synchronization. Colors that weren't colors but the essence of all thought, floated away in all directions—

A great peace came over Mr. Gamble.

He saw that the gleaming office was no more, that the lot, and Hollywood, and even the world were for him no more. And he knew at last what it was he had been seeking all these years, what it was that Tobor, the perfect servant had brought him.

Nothing.

THE ETHER VIBRATES

(Continued from page 7)

fan organizations in the December issue of our companion magazine, THRILLING WONDER STORIES, the list will be a lot longer. So, if you want to discover new fan friendships, give us the dope on your local setup.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

WHEN the first moon rocket fails to reach its destination and, turning in its flight, crashes upon the Catskill estate of magazine publisher L. A. Borden, the victims include not only the publisher and his family but Keith Winton and Betty Hadley, editors of some of his magazines.

To Winton the situation is especially perplexing for, without knowledge that he has been officially killed, he finds himself very much alive on a world where nothing is quite as it should be—where history takes a sudden tangent and no atom bomb has exploded, where interplanetary travel is an established fact and money—metal money—is contraband.

In one of the most original science fiction novels yet written Fredric Brown traces Winton's progress through this unexpected cosmos—a novel entitled WHAT MAD UNIVERSE, which will lead the story parade in our September issue. It is a novel of divergent worlds—yes—but a novel so surprising in concept and fulfillment that in itself it constitutes a divergence upon orthodox theories of multiple probabilities.

The world in which Winton finds himself is full of unexpected contrasts and apparent anachronisms. New York, for instance, is apparently in the process of a barbarous reversion despite the fact of space travel. And Betty Hadley, whom he had hoped to marry in pre-explosion existence, is a sort of consort to one Joe Doppelberg, in previous life an avid science fiction fan, here the savior of the Solar System and cosmic hero.

Winton is increasingly up against it as this strange new world closes in about him—until, seeking money that is legal tender, he writes a couple of stories and is accused of plagiarizing from himself. Then he is really in the fire—in a jam apparently inextricable, whose ultimate solution is as finely conceived as it is unexpected. WHAT MAD UNIVERSE may well be the stf novel of the year.

The Hall of Fame, thanks to our increased number of pages, will be present in greater length than was heretofore possible with one of the most famous of all early stf classics, TETRAHEDRA OF SPACE by P. Schuyler Miller.

This is the story of the self-spawning. highly intelligent invaders from Mercury who land in a jungle valley behind the Andes where only a few ignorant savages and a quartet of white men engaged upon an archeological expedition are present to fight them.

It is a pretty one-sided fight and not in humanity's favor, especially since one of the white men turns traitor to his kind, but the visitors are not as familiar with Earth as they thought and the disaster that strikes them it utterly unexpected.

The story is further remarkable for its portrayal of a successful effort to meet and confer by utterly alien bodies. All in all it is a novelet which contains all of the catastrophic dilemmas at which the old masters were so adept as well as the more intellectual

approach of modern stf authors. It is a fine novelet, a story well ahead of its time.

Along with these two heavyweights, of course, will be another novelet and a full-bodied selection of short stories as well as Ye Ed with his various records of your and his trials and tribulations throughout the intervening period. Be on hand for the big September issue!

WELL, we suppose we must have asked for it. At any rate the letters this time were larded with more poetry (?) than usual—some of the verse so free it won freedom in the incinerator. But the crop is up to its recent high level (we think) and the opening gun is one of the very best of the lot. So—

WHAT IS SFT?
by Ronald Wagner

Dear Ed: I have been researching and think I have figured out a completely satisfying definition to settle the controversy that has gone on for years as to what constitutes a science fiction story. Also such terms as pseudo science stories, fantasy stories and weird stories.

What started me researching was your comment in TEV in January this year to a letter that led off TEV by Franklin Kerkhof.

What I believe may be unimportant to readers but I think the term science-fiction throws people off the track as to what should and what should not be considered as science fiction and published in THRILLING WONDER and STARTLING. I think it is really a misnomer and should be regarded as such by all STF fans.

First, your comment that the most important single element in a successful tale of science fiction be "magic" is good. Science fiction, fantasy and pseudo science *are* fundamentally based on magic—that feeling of awe so prevalent in prehistoric and aboriginal races. And this feeling is what every story in this field, by whatever name readers call it, attempts to recapture for the readers—that deeply imbedded emotion so prominent a part of all STF fans.

Now to the researching:

First I looked up the word *pseudo* as used in pseudo-science stories. It comes from the Greek and means "false." That gives a definite semantic explanation. It simply means the reader is going to be entertained by a story employing false science (which really is only science that has not been proved) to heighten the element of "magic" inherent in all good science fiction stories—or pseudo science stories—as you said.

Next I looked up some old editorials, articles and letters on the subject. One I had taken from a STF magazine (I don't have the name or date) and was called COMING GOLDEN AGE by P. Schuyler Miller (who needs no introduction to STF fans). Just a few thoughts will I pass on to you from that editorial.

He said, in finer writing, that writers were establishing a truly remarkable world out of bits of possibility and probability. He mentioned most of the common themes of STF writing and wrote of the doings of dauntless heroes, ray guns etc.

He spoke too of the "Golden Age" of humanity, "forgotten" civilizations, myths etc., reminding readers that yearning for those marvelous places and times is why, right down at the bottom, we pick up STF magazines and read the stories.

Another comment, made in the long-gone magazine Science Fiction, told what the authors of STF were trying to do. On a pinhead, the gist of the comment was something like this—A bigger thrill for the reader than in any other type of fiction—thrills of magic, unearthly adventures, alien civilizations etc.

Sure, that's what the real STF fan wants—he doesn't give a pound of flesh whether a certain story he liked should be classed as science-fiction or not. He is content if the story is beautifully done—well enough to satisfy his unquenchable yearning for that element of "magic."

Now another editorial, by Robert W. Lowndes (also well-known to STF), was titled THE WEIRD AND THE FANTASTIC. He put science fiction and fantasy in one class and weird fiction in the other. He went on to give the most remarkable explanation of a weird tale I have yet read and I won't try to interpret it.

Science fiction, however, he believed to be the opposite of weird, being based on man's curiosity instead of man's fears (a wonderfully lucid concept). And fantasy, like science fiction, he assumed to be explainable by and subject to physical laws that were proven or would be proven. But fantasy did not take the trouble to explain phenomena presented—as science fiction did. Furthermore, he placed fantasy separate from myths, legends, fairy tales etc.

He said science fiction and fantasy go hand in hand, building for the future.

It was a good editorial, Ed—I hope you read it or can get your hands on it.

Another article, this time in the similarly defunct Future Fiction, by Derwin Lesser, titled HOW TO WRITE SCIENCE FICTION, gave its viewpoints. I wish I could quote the entire piece but I will have to put several of the ideas into my own words instead (You and I both know plagiarism is not, thank Space, looked upon kindly).

A science fiction story, to him, was simply a good adventure story based on logical science—and it had to be believable.

But it did not have to have a formula plot—preferably a story based on "novelty" (Here's that fundamental idea back again—novelty is simply another way of saying "magic").

He mentioned "thrilling" the reader with "unusual" happenings to insure a good story, "unusual" being a synonym for "magical" happenings.

But now I come to the best interpretation yet given—right in STARTLING STORIES itself, January, 1947. It came in a letter by Edmond (good old world-wrecker—and saver) Hamilton about his wondrous novel THE STAR OF LIFE. It would be valuable to STF fans if you would reprint that letter, Editor.

Though Edmond may not have realized it, he gave out the fundamental concept behind all science fiction, fantasy fiction, pseudo science fiction and weird fiction and also a mighty fine piece of inspirational writing. It's the same remarkable "magic." But Ed used a different term. He called it "wonder." And he defined it admirably. I agree with you and Ed Hamilton that all these stories called so many different names should be aimed at that element "magic" or "wonder."

I don't care and I don't think any *conscientious* STF fan cares whether or not a story belongs in a science fiction magazine or not—just as long as it satisfies that emotion of "wonder."

Truly, I am in favor of calling, to be trite, "a spade a spade." Science fiction, fantasy fiction, pseudo science fiction etc. really should be called WONDER fiction.

Anyway, those concepts are what I believe and what I am trying to inject into my own writing. I have been what you might call "practising" science-fiction writing for four years now.

And I think I am about ready to start producing stories STF fans really want, that great stuff Ed Hamilton and Hank Kuttner and others serve up so well—the element of "wonder."—*835 N. Lombard Avenue, Oak Park, Illinois.*

You leave little for us to say, Ronald Wagner. A darned good letter all around. If you write fiction half as well we'll be looking for your stuff.

Now, just by way of contrast, a very brief briefies.

HE WANTS IN TOO
By Russell Clagett

Dear Ed: Congratulations on your new large size (I mean the magazine of course). Under your very capable leadership (and I am quite sincere) it is getting better and better—and not just in quantity. I'll always read it, as long as you feature such authors as Wea Long . . . and Russell Clagett.—*7508 Harford Road, Baltimore 14, Maryland.*

Keep them as short as that, brother Clagett, and you'll be a regular feature too. Next comes one not so brief but at least as interesting.

SLATER SPEAKING
By Captain Kenneth F. Slater

Dear Editor: March '48 issue to hand. Thanks for printing my last letter and I hope that after your interpreter has finished you will have room for this one. I want to tell a few folks a few things—in a nice way of course.

William L. McIff—The CAPTAIN FUTURES you want are Spring and Summer, 1943, and Winter, 1944. I don't have them but lots of folk your side have.

Marion E. Zimmer—Soma. First reference I can find of such stuff is in Aldous Huxley's novel BRAVE NEW WORLD, in which it is a comparatively harmless drug issued to the populace to keep 'em happy. Either tablet or liquid form. Maybe in la St. Clair's future someone has removed the "drug" quality and it is now a harmless beverage.

Lin Carter—I note your dissatisfaction with assorted letters—like you I have a great liking for those that bubble over with life and are full of insults to authors, editors and other folks, like fellow letter writers. I am overjoyed with some of the poetic efforts—and I know rude remarks are taken in good part all 'round. But if they were *all* like that—what a bore!

Rosco Wright—Well, I'd like to see the Hall of Fame continue but what I would suggest (for the second time) is to let us (all the gals and guys like you and me, Rosco) pick the stories. G'wan, give us a list, please, Mister Editor.

And just a word to Wanda Reid—look, pal, you asked for trouble. I'll let the other fan hand that out. I'll just give you advice—try reading some other Merritt, not SEVEN FOOTPRINTS TO SATAN. The one you picked I think gave him a headache to write—not his normal style at all. Anyway, give it a try, Wanda.

Well, dearly beloved and much sufferin' Ed, that covers that—now for the rest of the March ish.

Cover—not too bad, but what was the band playing? "Deep in the Heart of Texas?"

The lead story was pretty good although I've heard the theme before. I got a bit dizzy trying to keep my space-resonant 'viser trained on the right world in the early chapters but they sorted themselves out.

"And We Sailed the Mighty Dark"—I'm still sailing. The whole thing was a bit dim, methinks.

Kuttner's "Martian" crept by on that ending, which was just what I did *not* expect.

"Climate Disordered" was a crib from a recent magazine fact article, Mr. Sprague, or did you write it before that? (Mr. Sprague has never read the article in question. ED.)

"The Penultimate Trump"—nice work, RCWE, nice work. Methinks there's a moral somewhere but I lost it in my interest in the story.

The Hall of Fame selection was not one of Weinbaum's best. I never could class it as either stf or fantasy personally.

Lastly I take "Mistake Inside"—fantasy pure and simple. And I don't care what ANYONE says—I like fantasy, just as much as true stf. I think it impossible to classify many stories as strictly stf or strictly fantasy. Some you can, but most you can't—so let's have 'em all. The true stf, the true fantasy, the inbetweeners. Then we all get our money's worth.

I commented on the increased size in my previous letter—but just for the record let me repeat—I am with you all the way.—*Riverside, South Brink, Wisbech, Cambridgeshire, England.*

No comment from us—but thanks, Ken.

VOICE FROM THE PAST
by Gwen Cunningham

Dear Sir: So I enjoyed Long's novel, "One of Three," It was fun to read. But in the cold sober reflection of the finished product it wasn't a very new idea (what is? ED.). Much of it made me feel as if it were a story I'd read before—an echo. However, it *was* fun to read so no hard feelings, Wesley.

After all, you stressed something a lot of us shrug off and perhaps fail to grasp at all—the still ever-present precariousness to the world and its denizens that is embodied in the atom bomb. It wouldn't hurt us to read a million stories about it if it would make us think about it. I mean us—the little ones.

"And We Sailed the Mighty Dark" by Long (Frank Belknap, this time) was very nice and romantic enough for any of us girls. Those pups of his sound cute—wish I had one! It ought to be fun to watch the mirages walk by (Maybe Gable?).

"Mistake Inside" by James Blish was really cute, honest it was. Imagine Hell disguised so that we didn't know it *was* Hell—and then the horror as we saw the mask slip. Golly, what cold chills *that* gives me. Anyway, a good story, good plot, good characters. I liked the whole thing.

"Climate Disordered" by Sprague tickled me. And it's not quite as far-fetched as it sounds, really.

"The Penultimate Trump" by Ettinger was good. I'm radical enough to feel like loudly cheering through my sneering when Haworth gets "transported" as it were (He really got sent, didn't he, Gwen? ED.). I hope he liked his trip. Boy, was he conceited! Too many money guys think as he did.

The question before the house, now, is—if I were in his shoes, financially speaking, how would I act? Which makes me sadly shake my head. I'm afraid I know. Aren't people *awful?*

"Brink of Infinity" by Weinbaum was beyond me as I can't add up my bank accounts, let alone infinity. Not too hot in my books, but maybe some math prof got a kick out of the story. Who knows?

The big thing about your mag is its art work. Finlay is a wonder and I, for one, lean strongly in his favor all the time. His girls are simply dreams—and nothing could be better than that! The cover girl was lovely but somehow it looked too lurid. The black-and-white on page 15 was better a thousandfold. Bergey is okay—but beside Finlay there's no comparison.

"Don't Look Now" by Kuttner is good. Kuttner is an old hand and he seldom disappoints me.

I certainly do approve of the new length of your magazine, boys. It's too soon finished anytime and to delay the end is a service to humanity. Thanks from the heart. The nice long "Ether Vibrates" too is a feature I should hate to see curtailed. I read it through before I begin the stories. And when *my* letter is in—boy, am I happy! As you should know by now I like the fans and I like the mag and I like the whole works.—*8519 MacArthur Boulevard, Oakland, California.*

We think you're okay too, Gwen. My word, or should we say *our* word! If you had used the word "cute" just once more you'd have got that whole works you claim to like. Really, m'dear . . . !

BIGGER BUT BETTER
by Tom Pace

Dear Ed: Bigger, as the man said, and better—both of them, definitely. Especially bigger, though there is nothing at all wrong with this issue of SS. Notable among the stories are F. B. Long's "And We Sailed the

Mighty Dark," Kuttner's "Don't Look Now," W. Long's "One of Three" Blish's "Mistake Inside" and Weinbaum's ingenious little "Brink of Infinity."

The other two, while good short stories, aren't SS caliber. More at the SatEvePost level—though I must admit that Robert Heinlein has pulled the slick-paper concept of stf up quite a few notches. And Fred Ludekins, formerly a good slick illustrator, is well along toward being one of my fave stfantasy artists. Incidentally, how long do you people think it will be before stf mags are slick with color interiors and all that?

Frank Belknap outdoes the other Long with his novelet. He gets over the awesome idea of space itself, the utterly different universe space-travelers will have to get used to. I feel that old stfans, who are more or less inured to the idea of deep space, will be the best spacemen. Not so apt to go psycho, so to speak.

I liked this story best in the issue. Kuttner's masterly "alien" yarn was second. This story, like the best Allen tales, uses shadow instead of light to put itself over—shows alienity (we like "alienness" better. ED.) mainly by human reaction to the alien or allen concept

Just as a semi-footnote, my favorite story in this vein is the short story Manly Wade Wellman wrote for either SS or TWS just an issue or so ago. I forget the name but the readers will know what I mean. The story itself was unforgettable.

The illustrations this issue are fine, especially Finlay's. Who did the pic on page 105?

Ed, is Gene Hyde right about you being a disc collector? Man after my own heart, thou! Given the time and money I'd devote quite a bit of my life span to that. Currently I am conducting a feud here at tech with a chap who thinks Bunny Berigan is better than Billy Butterfield. I don't (please, Ed., don't confuse things by mentioning Louis Armstrong or Bix).

I know only a few guys (comparatively) here at Tech. But of that bunch I know only two or three who are stf readers. I guess there are a lot more—you don't have time for active fan club stuff here—but I wish I could run into a few. Not with any "organizing" in mind, just to chew the fat.—*Box #403, Georgia Tech, Atlanta, Georgia.*

The Wellman story you have in mind, Tom, is THE TONGUE CANNOT TELL. It appeared in the October, 1947, issue of THRILLING WONDER STORIES.

Our disc jockey days are behind us, alas. We did have a collection of about 300 Bix and Trams, Red Nichols, Louis Armstrongs, Don Redmans, Bessie Smiths and the like but some so-and-so of a mover lifted them too many years ago and kind of took the heart out of us. So we've listened in the flesh since.

Having heard both the late Bunny Berigan and the very-much-current Billy Butterfield play many times, we honestly wouldn't know how to make a pick. It would depend upon which was playing better on any one particular night. And then somebody like "Lips" Paige or Max Kaminsky might come along and tee off and top them both—or maybe Muggsy Spanier. Both were great—let it go at that. This is an old-timer speaking.

ABOUT TIME FOR A DIP
by Frances Keysor (rhymes with wiser)

Dear Ed: I've been an stf fan since 1925 and I think it's about time I dived into tha fan pool. I gather that the usual procedure is to pan the eover. Indeed, some of them are strange—in fact so very strange that I don't recognize them on second sight and I bring home a second copy of the same ish. But what's in a eover? That on the March ish was definitely true to the story and well done.

The stories, however, were all below par by my rating. "One of Three" left too many loose ends to think about. W. L. didn't take into consideration all the ifs while he was iffing (love that word! I knew I had an iffing in the offing). What would have been the outcome if the home had not been invented at all—or, for that matter, what if I had gone to the market by a different route or if—oh, well! There are too many ifs.

TEV was by far the best feature in the March ish. I especially liked Joe Kirschnick's letter and I heartily agree with H. Haley. You should have two mags, one for letters. I take Sneary for granted. After all, he is a product of the California schools (I'm a native myself). I'm practically a neighbor to him but there is an unofficial feud between South Gate and Huntington Park (I guess he remembers the time the letters H P were burnt on the South Gate high school lawn).

As for the so-called phonetic spellers, here is my answer—

Our lingo is really hard enough
Without a lot of silly stough
Some words may make one stop and eough
And further speech to them swear ough!
But all in all and for my dough
I'd just as soon they leave it sough.

I guess that will hold 'em till I get a rope!—*7108 Albany Street, Huntington Park, California.*

While pondering phonetic stuff
You might take gh as in rough,
O as in women, just for fun,
Follow with ti as in nation.
To know the answer is your wish?
Why G-H-O-T-I spells fish.

And now we're looking for a knotted rope ourselves—something with a noose on the end.

MUSCLEMAID
by Mrs. R. L. Atterman

Dear Editor: Can a newcomer muscle in? I have just devoured (well, practically) my first issues of STARTLING STORIES and THRILLING WONDER STORIES and let me say that the difference between my life before and after is like the difference between a plain pancake (½ hour after breakfast) and crepes Suzette.

This is really a family for reading you know—my husband, bis mother and I. What we know about science you can put in your eye but this is a new adventure and fun all the way.

Thanks again for publishing something *good* to read. —*2225½ South Santa Fe, Wichita 11, Kansas.*

And thank *you*, Mrs. Atterman, for the crepes Suzette.

WHAT'S SO FUNNY ABOUT IT
by Rosco Wright

Dear Editor: It is customary in this funny civilization to be reluctant to praise literary efforts for fear of being called a sucker. It is also customary to be lavish in commenting on a woman's figure for fear of being considered partly missing. It is my desire to disregard convention and look at things from an open minded standpoint. Frankly, sir, the constant improvement in *Startling* continually provokes me to "snitch" a bit of time from college studies to write you another letter of joy, and hope and hopes.

At the old price we got ⅛ pages more for a penny

than at the price of twenty cents for 148-pages-including-the back-cover-ad. Yet that is a small part of the story. The wider range of material, to include sophisticated, philosophic fantasy like "Mistake Inside," is more than worth the small increase in cost. I also like the one color plus white on the backbone of *Startling*. I trust this is not temporary like the temporary one-month face lift on the cover of "Wonder."

The March cover! Please tell Bergy this girl is his best stf cover to date. It even induced my wife to read the novel.

Who is the artist for the Ettinger and the Sprague yarns? He looks like the British artist Turner. Or is he Paul or Marchoni somewhat improved?

Stories:

MISTAKE INSIDE—like this type very much in contrast to those boring vampire and werewolves some people still publish. Why not revive STRANGE STORIES for the sophisticated fantasy yarn and forget Captain Future? Of course the straight fantasy mags aren't doing as well as sciencefiction these days. At least they don't pay authors as much. Maybe we'd better stick to SS and TWS.

DON'T LOOK NOW—but I liked the yarn.

AND WE SAILED THE MIGHTY DARK—intriguing title. Human interest.

THE PENULTIMATE TRUMP—ah, lovely world, lovely justice!

THE BRINK OF INFINITY—best HofF in long time. Not stfantasy.

ONE OF THREE (well my wife would put it first—it is a good yarn but a letdown from the artistry of Bok. Still a big improvement in plotting and character as compared to many novels of the past. And I did enjoy reading it, which is what is desired. Sometimes I wonder what is the use of giving a story last place. The decision is artificial, doubtless temporary and only about ten percent literary judgment.—*Rt. 2, Box 264, Springfield, Ore.*

The illustrator in question is one, Robert Braun, who turned up recently. Glad you liked MISTAKE INSIDE. We figure it one of the most adult and sophisticated stories we have ever had the privilege to run.

MIXED LINE-UP
by Rick Sneary

Dear Editor: Well, your new size will beinjoyed by all but my postman, who bent over now. (He once said I got as much mail as any one elce on his rout.) The rase in price bothers me not, as do to a tip I had already subed to your glowing mags, and thus will get them at the old price. Oh am't I happy. My pocketbook too. But even so I think the extry 32 pages well worth the extry 5c. Lets not have any checting tho. I know a big name slick that rased the price and nomber of pages. But after three issues was back to the old size. With the new price.

Well I see you admited the reason so maney colored skys was really that your less avid readers might miss a issue, if they looked alike.—Oh well if we must have them we must. Say, we know you can't tell us your name, but how about the head of your art dept. You say you have nothing to do/say as far as pics go. Well tell us who does and will hope on him.

Your story line up is nice. Nice and mixed that is You know I was going to burn Long down for his polt hi-jacking. *One of Three* started off like a combo. of *Kinkdom of the Blind* and *Destiny Times Three*. But after reading I desided that the emotions and characterizatlon were so good as to form a new story. Frankly it was not as good as the other two, but it was good enough. I'll admit I was wondering way *World 3* should be destroyed, but the reason seemed unreasonable enough.

I got a double kick out of *Climate-Disordered*, remembering a fan article by Jewett a wlle back, were he out lined possable plots slanted toward each of the pro-mags, useing this rain (snow)-making idea as the bases. Sprague's story was better, but not funnier.

You know you put me on a spot. Do I want the Hall of Fame droped? Gad. I don't know. On one hand, there are a lot of good stories, like this latest Weinbaum tale. But then there are a lot, a lot more stories that aren't worth reprinting. And you have used a lot of the latter kine. In fact *Conquest of Two Worlds* and the Weinbaum stories are the only HoF stories I have liked. Or at least as much as other stories in the same issue. So what to do. Well here is what I suggest. Don't print a *HoF* every issue. Hunt around tell you find a really good story. Like *You'll See a Pink House*, and then use it. As it is your short story writers are doing a lot better job that your resurch bunch.

By the way, I sort of take back what I said about Finlay. It may have been the war, by some were he lost something. The old bubbles and dots seem to be gone. Now we have just line shading. I realize that it is a lot easyer to line-shade, and much quicker, but it just doesn't look like the old Finley. What's the war does to every one. Look what it did to Hienlien. Of course he seems to be getting back in the old swing, after reading his lates. We've always said that the plup of today used the stories the slicks of tomorrow will. And it seems the change is taking place sooner than we fans had hoped.

Say, looking at the readers column, ones sees it is begaining to look like the UNO. With letters from, Sweden, England, South Africa, Canada and Texas. And you know I got a letter from a boy in Hungary. And I can't think how he could get my name unless he read it in a stf mag. As it was addressed Rick, and fandom is the only place I use my nick name. Tobad we can't forget about the stories and take up forgn affalres. We stf reads are supposed to be more bourd minded, maybe we could work out soom means of world peace. Amagin the slogan "WORLD FANDOM FIGHTS THE FOUR HORSEMEN."

Well must run now, the little green men have my dinner, and *THEIR EATING IT!—2962 Santa Ana Street, South Gate, California.*

Call us a plup again and we'll call on you —with a ray-pistol. Our able if harassed art editor is one of the world's ablest painters of game birds. He's good at painting decoys too.

A NEW READER
by Evelyn Short

Dear Editor: It seems silly to be writing to a magazine editor but after reading my first copy of STARTLING STORIES I simply must let you know how much I enjoyed it.

The novel by Wesley Long was swell and the idea of 3 worlds is off the beaten track. The novelet by Frank Belknap Long was another good one and I sure would like to own a mirage pup.

The short stories were good too. I read DON'T LOOK NOW by Henry Kuttner and started looking at everyone for a third eye. However, it didn't take me long to get back to the magazine. Carter Sprague's CLIMATE—DISORDERED did not contain very much science but I liked it.

Your Hall of Fame story was fine. It had me chewing my claws for fear Doctor Aarons would not answer Strawn's question.

I enjoyed every page of your magazine, especially THE ETHER VIBRATES, and I got a kick out of all the people who complain about the stories you print. If they don't like them why read them?

At any rate I'm not kicking. Now to the cover. Bergey, whoever he is, can paint! The cover stood out in a class by itself on the newsstand, thus causing me to buy the mag.

I'd like to ask one favor of you—sort of get onto James Blish and have another story by him soon. His MISTAKE INSIDE rated A-One-Plus with me in the whole book—*Belknap, Illinois.*

Okay, Evelyn, what's silly about writing to editors? This one is very glad you did. We hope you enjoy future issues of SS and of THRILLING WONDER STORIES as much as you did the March edition. We'll do our

best with Blish, rest assured. And write us again.

WOT, NO SCIENCE?
by Bob Shea

Dear Sir: No doubt the laudatory messages concerning your new enlarged format are pouring in, so to save you the trouble of plowing through a paragraph of superlatives, I will simply say that I agree with the collective praises of the other fans.

My main purpose in writing this letter is to express my thoughts on a subject which has come up regularly in the Ether Vibrates—the kind of stories a science fiction magazine like yours should print. The occasion for this is the appearance in the March issue of *Startling Stories* of two stories which will probably receive a lot of unfavorable comment. I refer to "And We Sailed the Mighty Dark" and "Mistake Inside," especially the latter. Both these stories lack the science element which most of your fans seem to think is indispensable to your magazine. I can't understand their attitude.

In my opinion, the primary purpose of any story should be entertainment. I don't mean by this that a story should be written "down" to the reader. A story can and should be literature. In fact any really good story is literature. It seems to me that the real purpose of your magazine is to print stories in which the characters or background, or both, are imaginary or speculative, not just stories where the plot is based on some scientific quirk.

So keep up the good work. Continue to print entertaining stories, let the science fall where it may, and folks like me will continue to read your mag.—*150 Bennett Avenue, New York 33, New York.*

Well, we'll try, Bob. The only false estimation in your letter seems to be in the amount of vituperation the two stories in question drew. They got, if anything, less than the other yarns in the issue and received a heck of a lot of nice words from readers.

But thanks for reaffirming what has always been our policy. Science fiction must always be fiction first, science second, at least as far as this editor is concerned. It is possible to tack a few phony formulae onto almost any good story to give it the pseudo-scientific look—but if the story isn't there the most fascinating theorems (complete with corollaries) in the world are just so much dry bushwah to all but a few fuddy-duddy figure maniacs. And we don't mean the kind of figures Bergey, Finlay and Stevens handle so expertly.

LET IRE BE UNCONFINED
by Philip Gray

Dear Editor. Ere the repressed ire which I have been harboring since reading TEV in the latest issue of SS begins to manifest itself I wish to pay a couple of compliments to your magazine. When Frank Belknap Long abandoned weirdism long enough to write AND WE SAILED THE MIGHTY DARK he, in my opinion, made a move I find no difficulty in applauding. And if you could convince your other contributors to produce more of this quality your magazines will not only improve but should become the best in the field of original sif material.

Notice, please, I said 'more' of this quality, for of late you seem to have printed quite a few stories that I would not hesitate to call excellent and I, for one, hope to see your authors realize more fully that fantasy and s-f are two more branches of literature which are coming into their own and not a place where they may be able to dump a hodge-podge of trash for a group of gullible readers merely as a means of alleviating their income. Do I seem just a bit long-winded? Pardon if so, but I think you see my point.

We can always depend on Kuttner to write a good story with a punch in it. As well as I should know HK's climaxes by now he still takes me by surprise, and DON'T LOOK NOW was a very good example. All of which goes to prove one should keep his big yap shut! Which I am not going to do for a little while yet.

Another bone I have to pick is Bergey's slushy pies in the last issue. And as for your statement of the cover pics being something to attract attention I ask this question:. Who are you trying to attract—pin-up addicts? Still the man can draw, or paint, that much is beyond dispute. Witness the Dec. cover of TWS. That was something Bergey can well be proud of.

Your letter department needs a little improving yet. If a person doesn't know how to spell I will not reprove him, but I cannot see the literary misdeanors some of the readers deliberately make in their letters. Are we supposed to read stuff like that, or is it just another school-boy fad? I agree with Capt. Slater anent this phonetic business. The correct language is that which the most people use the most and in that manner a tongue will change and improve almost by itself. Anyway, I get a big kick out of your sense of humor. Enough. I like TEV just the same and have come to know a lot of fine fellows via it and others of the same kind in different mags.

Keep Leinster, Bradbury, Long and all the other good ones coming in if you can. I realize an editor cannot conjure material out of thin air. Someone has to write it—and if these boys continue to turn out good stuff that means we will all be happy. However don't get the idea I would like to see your mag perfect. I have to have *something* to gripe about.—*1539 West Harrison Street, Chicago 7, Illinois.*

Listen, bub, we *do* correct spelling (if we catch the mistakes, that is) in all but Sneary's letters, which are too good to alter. Incidentally, in view of your own note, it's a good thing we do. As for the phonetic horrors, we agree with you—but they did have some novelty value.

WHO are you trying to attract—and why not WHOM?

ODE EAR!
by Marion Zimmer

Dear Editor: Being temporarily exiled from classes, by reason of a badly sprained knee, I find time to read the latest STARTLING and to toss a few comments your way, complimentary and otherwise. I see the typical Earlurid Bergey is back on the cover. However, it wasn't a Bem—and the girl WAS pretty, with a somewhat disconcerting air of resemblance to yours truly. Now I'm SURE I've never met Bergey, nor am I conceited enough to think I'm cover-girl material, but it's odd to say the least—inasmuch as that same blonde has made her appearance on several recent covers. Who is she—Mrs. Bergey? Could be my double in one of those other-dimensional worlds, maybe????? I've meant to mention this in letters for former isues, but never quite got up the courage.

Whoever the woman may be, she's lucky. When *I* work in the College lab, *I* have to wear an old grey smock—and here this femme is wearing her prettiest *decolletage!*

Same goes for your inside art. Finlay is definitely a fantasy artist, no matter what others say. He is wasted on stef.

But I DO like your new enlarged format. In the first place, there are not one, not two, but FIVE short stories! This alone is worth the added price. Now add thirty-two pages to the LETTERS, and I'll gladly pay ANOTHER nickel!

ONE OF THREE was a fine novel. I like your alternation of stef and fantasy. LANDS OF THE EARTHQUAKE—Fantasy. KINGDOM OF THE BLIND—Stef. LORD OF THE STORM—half and half. MAN IN IRON CAP—stef. BLUE FLAMINGO—fantasy (and incidentally, fine fantasy, inasmuch as I didn't have a chance to comment on this fine story, due to examinations and the like).

And now you come up with another stef yarn, as fine as any yet, better than some. Usually there are only TWO time-planes. But Wesley Long (whoever he may be) has done THREE! And as a woman, I enjoyed the author's playing around with Virginia's reactions as well as the hero's The next thing I hope will happen will be, that some kind author will write a story with a woman as hero. Hmm, that's an idea. Maybe I'll do it myself. I mean a full-length fantastic novel. With a woman as hero. Why not have Miss Brackett do it for you? Or even St. Clair—if she could tuck up her humor for long enough. Come on, femme fans, why don't you all write in and ASK the editor to print one!

Another valuable point. I wonder just what my home-town police would say, if I went to my home-town police and told them I'd established connection with Mars? Probably pretty soon I'd be chewing my nails behind bars, and doubting my *own* sanity!

The other stories will be dealt with very briefly. Because I have a pome coming up here, and I don't want you to cut it.

MISTAKE INSIDE—Fine, wonderful, superb! Words can't describe it!

AND WE SAILED THE MIGHTY DARK—I'm still gasping with the winds of space!

THE BRINK OF INFINITY—a little while ago, if you'd asked me about the Hall of Fame, I would have said "Junk it!" However, now I say "Hang on to it—but tight!"

CLIMATE DISORDERED—Gaaaaah! (in the interests of brevity—I could fill a page telling what I didn't like about it.)

PENULTIMATE TRUMP—ditto.

DON'T LOOK NOW—I'm still shuddering! That man Kuttner, oh boy, oh boy! Henry, Henry, O'Henry! I love him! I could write an epic poem in his honor! But don't worry, I won't.

Despite the fact that I dislike weird fiction in general, Kuttner, like Ray Bradbury, has the rare gift of making the eerie and horrible into a connoisseur's delicacy. A gift which Lovecraft first created—in some of his work; a certain something which is a "gift of the dark gods of the macabre." As Tom Pace put it in a long-ago letter, SKOAL!

And here all along, I had it figured out that the man in the brown suit was the Martian!

You plead for poetry—and that clarion call shall never while I live fall on deaf ears—merely on dumb ones. Behold, this mighty brain doth whirl and buzz, and there issues forth from these dessicated lips an

ODE TO *STARTLING*

Great Startling! Who on Earth doth tell
The presage of our future woes
With atom bomb, and Martian threat
And thrills and chills to very toes
Of magazines thou dost excel
I ever will be in your debt.

Great Bergey! Who with lasting Fame
With Bem and Femme, you wage your war
On dull existence, colorless.
Your blotchy truimph makes your name
Ring through all space; and more and more
You paint and paint, and art is Less.

Great editor! By Chad and Rick
Besieged, and Kennedy-beset
You doubtless mop an anguished brow
A brow endewed with manly sweat
At seeing, o'er composing-stick
This Ode by Astra face you now.

Repose in Peace, beloved Mag.
I love thee still, through all thy woes.
Through all thy art-work, good or ill
I love this Startling science-rag
And will defend against thy foes
And to thy death (or mine) will read thee still.
AMEN.

You asked for it—remember? Aw, stop bawling! Best wishes for another good issue like this. But with Kuttner in the lead it's bound to be. Darn it, some day I'm going to WRITE that ode to Kuttner. Will you print it???? *RFD #1, East Greenbush, New York.*

Astra, the news that you resemble
The March ish cover makes us tremble
With warm anticipation.
That when East Greenbush you escape
Toward Manhattan you will break
To our delectation.

Nice ode, Marion—yours, I mean—if a bit bumptious. By the way, Bergey is married and has couple of kids, they tell me.

CHEERS AND JEERS
by Wally Weber

Dear Editor: Please make way for one of the best letters you have ever had the opportunity to read. What inspired it? Why the new, super-sized, improved STARTLING STORIES!!! (Time out for cheers and beers, etc.)

Yes, ladies and gentlemen, you too can receive tons of mail. Merely publish stf in larger quantities (and get Bergey to do your covers for you). The thrill of a lifetime is in store for you if you send for our free booklet. It will show you how to subscribe to STARTLING STORIES!!! (More cheers etc.)

No doubt you know just how good your pulpy publication is, old man. But allow me to put it in my own words.

What's the idea of raising the price? You certainly ain't *paying* those dilapidated hacks to crank out that junk?! Wesley Long writes like that hole in his head bothered him. F. B. Long is either trying to do stf in or just doesn't know any better. Hank Kuttner has all the writing ability of a two-year-old moron, and he was below par.

The James Blish thing was a mistake in itself. Carter Sprague must get his ideas from the clubroom conversations of the Quarter-wit Padded Cell Society. Ettinger must use the ideas that Sprague discards. Weinbaum is better off where he is. The artwork is terrible and so is the rest of the magazine.

All in all, it's a hundred percent better than before.

Well, now that I've made way for the best letter you have ever had the opportunity to read, keep on reading. You might run across one yet.—*5253 18th Northeast, Seattle 5, Washington.*

If another like the above doesn't run right over us first, that is. And here, so help us, is a leetle po-em in the same mood. We hope it's not catching, even in fun, we hope, we hope, we hope.

SOMETHING WORSE
by Hugh Allen

Dear sir: OK, Bub, you asked for it:

The artist is bad,
The writers are worse;
The critics are awful
And so is their verse.

The edge is untrimmed,
The type is too small;
The stories are corny,
The Ed's off the ball.

But in spite of it all,
We'll buy it, Gosh Ding!
Until something better
Replaces the thing.

—*1911 Nadine Street, Knoxville 17, Tennessee.*

Now we feel your judgment
Is sadly amiss,
Our artists are swell and
Their gals fit to kiss.

Our writers show genius,
With every new script,
Full many a moon's passed
Since one of them slipped.

Trimmed edges you wish? Let
A razor blade do—
Then trim your own edges
And that's all for you!

IDEA SUPPLY SHOP
by Carroll M. Flanders

Dear Editor: You may print the following as you see fit. It will be short and sweet, as I do not have much time to devote to letter writing.

I would like to commend you on your editorial introduction in The Ether Vibrates. S S. is one of the few magazines I bother to collect and I always read that department first. How about telling us fans something about the possibility of traveling to other worlds; escape speed etc? Now that, again, the impossible has been made possible, would it not be possible that a rocket ship could travel to another planet? The rocket boys are sure on their toes.

The novels you have been giving us are excellent, but the short stories, except Hall Of Fame, are travesties upon your policy. I admit that they are well-written and logical, but they do not fit in with my idea of good reading. If your authors are running out of ideas for stories, then tell them to write me and I will supply them with all they want. Or, perhaps you would enjoy receiving one written by myself?—*P. O. Box #153, Belfast, Maine.*

Do you keep your ideas file-carded Carroll? That we would like to see. Seriously, if you haven't time to write a long letter, how much can you spare to knock out the sort of short story we would be running?

As for escape speed to clear Earth's gravity, seven miles per second seems to be the most generally accepted estimate. This means a rate of 420 miles per minute or upwards of 25,000 miles per hour. Quite a jump from the 800-mile-per-hour speeds now being approached by jet and rocket planes and the 1,000 miles per hour or so attained by the V-2 rocket.

However, according to those in touch at the moment, there are no obstacles to attaining gravity-clearing speed within the next few years by following along lines currently being worked. And somebody is almost certain to come up with a short cut or two.

From "Around the World in Eighty Days" to around it in less than an hour—and probably within the span of a century. Things are moving, brother.

BACK TO NOVEMBER
by L. E. Bartle

Dear Editor: Recently I managed to lay my hands on a copy of SS for Nov., 1947, the first issue I have had since the end of 1939, and I want to congratulate you on Leinster's "Man in the Iron Cap." SS was always a favorite of mine because of the first-class novels that you published, and I was pleased to see that you are keeping up the high standard you originally set with "The Black Flame," "The Impossible World," "The Bridge to Earth" etc. The shorts in this issue were also above average.

As you probably know, S.F. is having a lean time over here most of the British mags that started up when the War ended have closed down, at least temporarily, owing to paper and printing difficulties. Have you any agents supplying your mags over here now, or any other suggestion for obtaining copies? Anyway, I am hoping to pick up further issues of SS & TWS, so keep up the good work.—*16 Milford Road, Walton, Staffordshire, England.*

The agency which handles SS and TWS in England is the American News Company, address obtainable in the London directory. I believe subscriptions can be arranged through them without difficulty. At any rate, luck, Mr. Bartle.

WE'LL BITE, WHAT?
by Lee Randolph

Dear Ed: Because that's what I read first, the first thing I'll add my brilliant remarks to will be TEV. Surprised?

Brenton Rice: How nice. If the atmosphere goes up in a flash, then what happens?

L. L. Shepherd: Didn't like the lead novel. I wonder what the other folks thought about it.

Joe Kirschnick: Are you by any chance of Indian descent? Short letter, save trouble, ugh.

A. H. Rapp: A poet, no doubt. But who is Roscoe? A pet beaver?

R. E. Ward: He liked lead novel, hmmmmm.

Rick Sneary: St. Clair did not write Noon. That was Hastings.

Zimmer: Liked the lead novel. Now who has the majority? Ha!

There is more of the same, but since it doesn't make sense, I'll just leave it to your imagination.

The next important thing is . . . THE COVER. (No, you're supposed to cheer.) Until I read the story, I wondered if the dear girl had caught an atomic mosquito. But now I know the awful secret. Shh—come closer and I'll tell. What! Afraid? But I'm harmless. Heh, heh.

I'll just list the stories in the order of my preference and refrain from any comment.

1) DON'T LOOK NOW, 2) AND WE SAILED THE MIGHTY DARK, 3) MISTAKE INSIDE. The rest of them all compete for the same place—fifth.

Even if my letter is sent,
The Ed will surely repent,
And send this missive sailing,
Soon after a red pencil flailing.

—*3524 Tilden Avenue, Los Angeles 34, California.*

Your writing ways you'd better mend
Before Ye Ed you try to send
And while we're on the subject, silly,
What happened to your first name, Billie?

We miss it. What happened— boy friend think it too unfeminine?

A TOUCH OF ACID

by Corporal John G. Carmichael

Dear Editor: Having just finished your March, 1948, issue of Startling Stories, I will now tell you what my opinion of the aforesaid magazine is (not that your Royal Highness cares one whit but just that I like to annoy editors).

One of Three was a surprisingly good effort considering the antiquity of its main theme. But who drew those illos? Why don't you hire an artist who can draw a picture showing the emotions which the story says the characters are feeling?

And We Sailed the Mighty Dark was likewise good and on a theme I have not seen too many times heretofore. What happened, did Mr. Long get original on you all of a sudden?

Don't Look Now. Kuttner very rarely flops and this wasn't one of those rare times.

Mistake Inside. More Fantasy than Science, but interesting.

Climate Disordered. Meant to be amusing no doubt.

The Penultimate Trump. Ditto.

The Brink of Infinity. I don't see why people insist on regarding Weinbaum as an author.

Now for the best part of your magazine, The Ether Vibrates.

Hans Tombrock. Oxygen can burn. But you need an atmosphere of Hydrogen or some similar gas. As for your "Frozen Oxygen" on Jupiter, Oxygen liquifies at a temperature much lower than that prevailing on Jupiter, as is shown by the fact that liquid oxygen is cold enough to freeze ammonia solid, and there is gaseous ammonia on Jupiter. Also, no oxygen has been detected on Jupiter, so there can't be much there, Mr. Brenton Rice. See The Comment on Oxygen burning in the last paragraph.

Now for Mr. Russell Clagett. Mr. Clagett, if you can not understand how a super Atom Bomb could be built, let me explain it to you. You have probably read the various newspaper stories about how science hoped to make bigger and better atom Bombs, but I will quote the methods anyway.

One method is to make use of the Lithium Hydrogen reaction, $_1H^1$ plus $_3Li^7$ equals $2\,_2He^4$ plus energy. Another is to make use of the "Solar Phoenix" reaction. Both of these can be started in commercially available materials by using a Uranium Bomb as a trigger. OK?

And, Mr. Editor, Pu is Plutonium.

Miss Wanda Reid (or is it Mrs?) has something there, when she says Merritt is not a very good author. I have read some of his efforts, and it was a real effort to wade through that stuff. But, Editor, you are wrong if you believe excessively verbose authors cannot be literary. Look at Dickens. (Should I duck now, or hold my place until I get the first return on that blast at Merritt?)

Wright has the Wright idea on the discontinuance of the Hall of Fame, since none of the Hall of Famers to date have measured up to modern standards.

Gene Hyde. Only one thing wrong with your Ammonia breathing Idea, so far as I can see. Your Bem would have to have a blood fluid something like liquid Hydrogen, to dissolve something as active as Sodium without reacting with it.

Frost must have been frostbitten, between the ears I mean. So he likes those HofF monstrositles. Well he can have them. Why don't you give some enterprising character the right to reprint anything which appeared in your magazine more than, say five years ago, so that he can print a mag solely for those who worship the "Good Old Days"?

Don Hutchison. What makes you think that life on another planet will per se be nothing like man as we know him? There is no known reason why something manlike should not be the form with the greatest survival value on Mars, for instance, as it has on Earth, currently, at least.

And why the bland assumption that any culture will be more ancient than our own? There is also no known reason why man cannot have been the first race of all the worlds to develop civilization. And I'm not just saying that because I'm human, either. Because, conversely, there is no known reason why man should have the only culture, or the most ancient one. Also, aliens don't have to be either sub- or superhuman. They don't have to be human, but there is no law of nature or man that says that that which is not human must be either better or worse than man. And you'll find that the "Average" Stf Author's idea of interplanetary war has humans on both sides, nowadays.

As for interplanetary warfare, I doubt that the first few interplanetary wars will be fought in space. That would require the invention of the necessary weapons before the necessity had been recognized. And that is contrary to the course of human culture, as should be well known to most of your readers.

Kenneth Stein managed to give proof positive that he was a neophyte in that paragraph in his letter in which he asked why did Nal and Grifa not vanish like everything else did.

Any experienced fan would have known that they did.

But that looks like a build-up for a sequel, to be set in the future, having one of the aforementioned characters go to a planet circling Antares. Could be?

What do you know, almost three pages, and still no comment on the cover. Bergey did follow the story more closely than usual this time. But why does Virginia sook so delighted that the sun has come home to roost between those lily white hands of hers? You can't convince me that any reasonably sane girl would be horrified.

That ought to be enough to give you some kind of a fit over my allegedly literary efforts, so I'll just have to quit now.—*AF 11150956, Squadron "B," 4144th AF Base Unit, Muroc, California.*

"Aforesaid", "heretofore", "allegedly" and "conversely"—what in Hades on Ades are you giving us? A treatise on the amortization of outhouses perhaps? As for Virginia, we think any reasonably sane girl *would* be horrified in her spot and she looked plenty horrified to us—are you there, Zimmer?

GETTING MONOTONOUS

by C. O. Simms

Dear Ed: It hardly seems that two months have passed since the last issue of S.S., but while passing the time away in a canteen in a discharge center (Yep, I'll be Joe Civilian again soon) I noticed a big bright spot among duller surroundings on the magazine rack. It could only be S.S. and I was right.

Anyway, the March ish. looked good from a quick scan at the contents page, and another few hours were quickly whiled away.

First of all, a story by my favorite, S. G. Weinbaum. The idea behind "The Brink of Infinity" was very good, though the plot seemed weak in parts. It seemed that Weinbaum got a brilliant thought about a professor of mathematics being in a spot where he had to get an unknown equation starting from scratch, with his life depending on the answer, but he didn't care too much how he got him there. It was still Weinbaum though, and put me down for one *vote* on reprinting his "Worlds Of If" and "Valley Of Dreams" if possible. I think V.O.D. was a sequel to "A Martian Odyssey."

While we are on reprints (this must be getting monotonous) the paper sbortage must let up one of these days, why not bring out another mag. For those longer reprints that cannot see the light of day in S.S., or, knowing your policy about reprints, how about bringing back Cap. Future (though some of his stories were of the crash-zap juvenile type) and continue the reprinting of those long classices in installments, as of old. There must be some way we can get them.

The lead story, "One Of Three," as I could say for many of the past issues, was an interesting theme on the post-atomic world. Stf seems to be running in series now. If a rocket landed on the Moon, there probably wouldn't be anything but Rocket-Landings-on-the-Moon stories for a couple of years.

Mr. Long seems to know what he is talking about on the technical side of the story, and it is an idea of mine that he is better known in some other field and just writes on the side. Keerect me if wrong.

The pics for "One Of Three" were the best of the whole mag., this boy Stevens can really draw. I still put him above Finley.

"Don't Look Now" by Kuttner made good reading. Who did the pic? "Climate—Disordered" and "The Penultimate Trump" made the filler section, though the illustrations were better than usual.

As for "Mistake Inside" and "And We Sailed the Mighty Dark," I found them so awful that I bestow them The Royal Order Of The Gold And Purple Striped O.M.G. (Oh, me goodness!)

The Ether Vibrates gets better and better all the time, and with this new format, you can squeeze in a few more letters. Goodbye.—*1769 Imperial Highway, Los Angeles 44, California.*

Okay, let's take them in order. We'll do what we can about Weinbaum but turn thumbs down on a third magazine. However, our enlarged format does permit the running of longer classics—which will begin to make their appearance in the September issue as noted in the "Next Issue" portion of this department.

As for the stories being a bit typical—well, the authors seem to like to write them that way (some authors, that is) and when they are good what are we to do. Long is well known in another field—electronic engineering to be exact. He did much war work on the proximity fuze and is currently commercially engaged as scientist by one of our larger corporations.

The illustrator for DON'T LOOK NOW was the aforementioned Braun. Sorry you don't like the OMG yarns. You can't have everything, you know, but we don't blame you a bit for trying.

COLE SLAWTER
by Es and Les Cole

Dear Sir: Our chief gripe this month is not with Bergey. Dismissing Earle's hyperthyroid as a werewolfette (March cover: look at her hands, men, *look at her hands!*), we would have a word with you, Herr Editor.

What's the matter with you guys? So now you have it in for science too? There's many a thing in this world that needs explaining. But considering that science has only gotten around to calculating that 4th decimal place in the last hundred years or so we don't think there's need to go off half-cocked on a lot of mumbo-jumbo. Give 'em a chance! And we had begun to have a great respect for you because of your stand on Lovecraft and Merritt. Oh, well!

Before we get off the subject of editors, is there any way fans can help in this matter of letters? Any special form you'd like us to use? Why not iske one of those extra pages and show us?

Speaking of extra pages, we're not getting five cents worth but six-plus cents worth. We're happy!

Letters this month were all lacking in qui vive; i.e., they were all pretty crummy. Sneary's back and the doldrums got him. Wigodsky was rather flat. The one bright spot was Pfc. James Evans. His commenis anent the HoF were suitable for the HoF!

Top stories were as follows:

1. "Mistake Inside." This bit of fantasy topped anything you laughingly printed as "sclence-fiction." Who is this Blish character?

2. "One Of Three." Wes Long's effort not bad. Some day, bowever, one of your writers is going to turn out a heroine who is not the most beautiful gal he can imagine; on the contrary. She'll wear horn-rim glasses, be flat-chested, won't know a thing about science, and will be 2½ inches taller than Hero. Also, we were all for Earth three. Wes was pretty shaky in determining why Earth three shouldn't survive.

3. "Brink Of Infinity." Stan G. had a style of writing which was peculiar to him alone. We like his stuff. But the reasoning was off. Look:

a) "1" and not "e" is the square root of —1.

b) Infinity is nelther a "numerical expression" nor a "mathematical quantity." Infinity is—ahem, we have neither space, inclination, nor ability to describe it. (It wasn't an explosion that drove that bug-house potentate nuts. It was speculating on infinity minus infinity!)

c) If he really wanted to stop any mathematician in ten questions all he would have to have done was pick a number like 0.743269 timea ten to the —200th power. Try and describe IT in ten statements!

Well, that about does it for now—*2903 Grove Street, Berkeley 3, California.*

That does it, Coles. But bow come you got the idea we had it in for science? All we were doing was giving the theories of Charles Fort the airing they need every so often. We do think a lot of the lesser folk who hang on the fringes of true scientific advancement are apt to be stuffy, unimaginative and generally non-creative folk who rear their philosophies upon theorems that are bound to be shattered with every new advance in knowledge.

As for form of letters, just put the address at the bottom (as you people did) and list *correct* names and addresses. Hereafter, by editorial irade, all undocumented pseudonyms go into the waste basket unread.

You can have your old 0.743269 to the -200th power! We don't want any part of it.

TOODLE-OO YOURSELF
by Jerri Bullock

Hello again, Ed: I won't comment too much about this ish (Feb.) of S.S., as I don't want to make my letter so long that the "cutter" goes snip-happy. All the stories were exceptionally good, but I missed St. Clair.

I'm very glad to hear Leigh Brackett will be back in the fold. Hardly a male stf writer can hold a candle to her! (Pretty, please, couldn't we have a Brackett-Bradbury opus; huh, Ed, huh?)

Any amateur fantasy or science-fiction artist who would be interested in a fanzine just for them, and by them, can drop a line to Russ Manning, Box 1746, Orcutt, Calif., for info. (We're going to make you sit up and take notice, Ed!) Toodle-oo.—*22200 Lemon Ave., Hayward, Calif.*

Personally, we're for keeping Brackett and Bradbury apart—we stand to get twice as many stories from these talented authors this way. Good luck, Jerri, with the new fanzine. We'll be watching for it with a well-honed typewriter.

ERRATA
by Rex Ward

Dear Editor: I am immensely pleased with the new 148-page SS! It's well worth the extra 5c. I doubt that you could have made a better move. You have my heartiest congratulations.

There are several little things which must be eleared

up, however, and I think I am the man to clear them up.

Number One: In the fanzine review, you state that FANDOM SPEAKS is published irregularly; on the editorial page it is plainly stated that it is a monthly. Number Two: Horrors! You state that the supplement to NECR[illegible]S is published by me! Evidently you thought that the address on my ad in that issue was the address of the magazine's editor. It is published by Dave MacInnes, then of Memphis, Tennessee, now of Baltimore, Maryland. It waa quite a surprise to see that I had been given credit for publishing a magazine that I didn't publish.

There were many typographical errors. Elseer, for Elsner, and, *worse*, you called Lin Carter's fine mag SPACETEEN, when it is SPACETEER.

The best illustration was Finlay's on page 76-77. Looked like Finlay of days past, when he was in his Golden Era. More like it! Stevens's pics were good for the novel. Excellent, in fact. All the illustrations were unusually good.

ETHER VIBRATES exceptionally good too. Best letter, of course, was by Jack Clements, which was out of this world. Keep up the Fanzine Review, but watch those errors.

All in all, the best SS for a *l-o-n-g* time.—*428 Main Street, El Segundo, California.*

Some of the errata mentioned were typographical errors—but others were caused by the illegibility of the originals. That SPACETEER thing—we still think it looked more like SPACETEEN!

Anyway (we curtsey, forefinger coyly pressed to our lips) we're glad you like getting more of us per issue.

BABBLING BRAT
by Dave Lesperance

Dear Ed: Oh, boy, Startling is now longer! Now we get seven Kuttner opi per ish instead of the usual five. Not sorry, tho.

Cover: A babe who could applaud with such destructive force would immediately be subsidized as the audience for radio programs.

One Of Three: (Sounds like something an Englishman might yell at a baseball game, doesn't it?) The least a reader deserves for bearing with an author for the length of a novel is a climax. This story did not have one: I was halfway through the overall ad before I realized the story had ended half a page above.

And We Sailed the Mighty Dark was fair but a little too mushy. I'm getting plenty sick of magic dogs, too.

Don't Look Now was a good story but the illo gave the whole thing away—too revealing. I think Hammerin' Hank missed a trick when he didn't make the man in the brown suit a cat. Oh, *so you* don't, eh? On the Q.T., Ed, Is Kuttner a sentient typewriter?

Mistake Inside was novel and interesting.

The Penultimate Trump and *The Brink of Infinity* were fair.

Concerning the continued appearance of the HoF: Take the Hall of Fame story and lay it beside the modern one that is vying for a place against it. Disregarding age, print the better story! This does not mean that you have to drop HoF. When you have an oldtimer that surpasses the later one, print it. I myself believe that the older story will, more often than not, come out second best.

TEV: Tell that Scandinavian that liking St. Clair is jitterbugging on thin ice but wanting the Sarge back is like playing Chopsticks on an atomic bomb. Men have been condemned to read all the wartime stf mags for less.

I like the phonetic fiends. They force you to whisk the cobwebs off your muddled brain.

Some critic claimed that a story with "babbling brats" in it was hopping on Bradbury's bandwagon. I disagree. The field of science-fantasy is all inclusive. In a complete cycle of the field, an author will almost invariably write a story or two with children for characters, the segment in which Ray has specialized. He probably has no intention of cutting in on a good thing, is just making the rounds. Even before Ray's advent, the possibilities were discovered. Witness *The Canterbury Ghost.*—*231 South 22nd Street, San José, California.*

Not to mention Lewis Carroll, Charles E. Carryl and that sentient typewriter him (or it-) self. And plenty of other authors of fame and repute.

We'll leave your other expressed opinions for the fans to chew over—but the plural of opus is *opera*, not opi or opussies (with or without brown suits) as has several times been noted in this column by editor and readers alike.

JUST FOR FUN
by Mrs. Inez Holder

Dear Editor: For the past eighteen (18) years I have been an avid reader of the various Sf mags. I have *never* yet found one that I *did* not thoroughly enjoy. I mean this. I have also read the letters sent to the various editors, beefing about stories or pics illustrating the stories, but I for one, have no beef. Some folks, I think, read the stories just to find fault with them and make it a point to write to the editor and point out even the minutest discrepancy—not me, I like to read for the sheer joy of reading and the Sf mags fill the bill so far as I am concerned.

Of course, if I were of a mind to, I could readily find fault too, but this is not the reason I read the Sf mags. I actually like them, just as they are. As for the pics I figure they should be *out of this world*, if they are in any way going to do any illustrating. I like them too. (They often remind me of some of the crazy dreams I have.) I have no kick whatsoever, as to any part of your book, nor of any of the other Sf mags. Again I repeat, "I like to read for the fun of it."

I buy your book at every opportunity, and I always enjoy it to the fullest. Thanks for letting me take up your time with this, and for goodness sake, and for my own piece of mind, keep publishing this mag, as I often need such fantasy to keep my mental balance. It's good for me.

I have just finished the Mar. issue, and was particularly pleased with the story, "One of Three". I also liked the rest of them, but as this story was long, I saved it till the last, and found that I liked it the best. Thanks again for your mag, and my hat's off to the authors, illustrators and you, the editor.—*1672 Coral Way, Miami, Florida.*

Please, Mrs. Holder—our headsize is already a trifle overbloated. But thank you—thank you so much.

A GRAIN OF RICE
by Brenton Rice

Dear Editor: Another good issue in my opinion (take it for what it's worth) but it was the short stories and the novelet rather than the novel that impressed me more this time.

Even though being an amateur, I humbly submit my ratings herewith on the basis of 10 points. ("What? No goofy rating system?" says the editor. "Nope," says I, "I'll leave that up to the more wacky of our scribes.")

Taking the stories in no particular order:

1. One of Three, by Wesley Long—6½ Pts.

This one didn't appeal to me too much because I had read a very similar plot to this one in another magazine some time ago. *(Ah! Ah! No names please!)* One discrepancy came to mind while reading it. When

Virginia went from Earth II to Earth I, why didn't she find a duplicate Virginia there? As evidence (Speaking of Bronson's house), "It was sandwiched between two other houses whose outlines and architecture she recognized." From this I take it that the houses in the two worlds are duplicates. Therefore, the people should be at least similar—not identical personalities of course, but the same persons should be on each of the two worlds.

2. And We Sailed the Mighty Dark, by Frank Belknap Long—8½ Pts.

Very good. I like 'em a lot better like this as they don't have long detailed explanations and instead leave things up to your own imagination. This author certainly has that capacity.

3. The Brink of Infinity, by Stanley G. Weinbaum—8 Pts.

Even though a classic, it's a new idea in stf writing to a novice like me, and I enjoyed it very much. He was sure a versatile writer and I'd like to see some more of his stuff come out.

4. Don't Look Now, by Henry Kuttner—8 Pts.

An O. Henry twist by a master whose stuff is always interesting whether short or novel length.

5. The Penultimate Trump, by R. C. W. Ettinger—7 Pts.

I don't get the title, or am I just dumb.

6. The other two stories (I didn't catch the names) —4 Pts. apiece.

Maybe some of the readers would go for this idea. At some appropriate anniversary of the mag why not publish the entire initial issue verbatim. It would recall memories of "the old days" to the older readers, and give us new ones a chance to compare an stf mag of yore to that of today.—*148 Alexander Avenue, Crockett, California*

Okay, so you score on the duplication of Virginia on Long's ONE OF THREE. Investigation via the author results in the information that the other two Virginia's, not being scientifically inclined, were both in the Palm Springs of their respective worlds, having a high old time. We consider this flighty reasoning but give it for what it is worth.

THE PENULTIMATE TRUMP seemed clear enough to us. Penultimate means the next to last and a trump is usually a trick-taking card in games where trumps are called. All it meant was that Haworth's preparation for eternal affluence was overcalled by the changing world in which he awakened.

You want the whole first issue of SS verbatim at "some appropriate anniversary?" Go out into the byways and buy yourself a copy. Do you want us to have our writers at our throats? Or do you?

SUCKER IS RIGHT!
by Lin Carter

Dearest Ed: Just thot I'd let you know how much I liked the March ish. I don't know how you do it, but your present high standard is rising higher with every issue. More power to you, pal.

ONE OF THREE was durn good! A difficult theme like that could easily have been mishandled, but Long did a swell job of it. He's a man to watch, if he can turn out stuff like that there. Kinda like KINGDOM OF THE BLIND, I thot, but more interesting. Some thought-provoking concepts, there. Good pix, too!

On the other hand, AND WE SAILED THE MIGHTY

[*Turn page*]

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DARK is a poor yarn hiding behind a swell title. The thing fairly reeked with impossible situations. F'rinstance (as a chum of mine pointed out), at the end, this big blond fellow walks up and starts sluggin' away at Hero for no reason at all. Then when everything gets straightened out, it turns out that Muscles is an accountant. A meek accountant, yet! And this brawny goon gives the gal up, without trying to get her back! WHEW!

But you redeemed yourself with DON'T LOOK NOW, a swell Kuttner, and the HoF classic that for once WAS a classic! Tho little more than a stretched out math puzzle, and implausible to boot, it was still interesting, as what by Weinbaum ain't?

For some strange reason, you seem determined to drag fantasy into SS by its ears if necessary. MISTAKE INSIDE was good, even if it did not fit in SS. Reminded me of deCamp. The pic was poor, Finlay has nosedived, compared to his toprank pre-war stuff.

Who's the new illustrator? I mean the one that illustrated the Kuttner & Ettinger yarns? Magarian? Looks sorta like him. 'Good.

Ah, I been waiting for this! Ya want poetry, huh? O.K. sucker!

The Sarge is gone, Xeno too,
The Bemlins are deported.
But I must give the mag its due—
You're rising, as reported!

You're on top now, in my mind,
And somehow gettin' better.
And while you're there, I'm sure you'll find
Every ish, my letter!

Before I end this hunk of immortal prose, re: the fanzine review, my mag is SPACETEER, not SPACETEEN, and incidentally, thanx for the kind words about #1. We love you, too!—*1734 Newark Street So., St. Petersburg, Fla.*

So what gives with this "Dearest Ed"?
We eye you with suspicion.
We wonder at the reason for
This soft-soap expedition.

So SPACETEEN spells SPACETEER
Which error makes you lowdown.
'Tis artist Braun who doth appear
On that page six-nine hoedown.

Frankly, we don't know whether we love you or not.

NEED FOR PHYSICS
by Rickey Slavin

Dear Editor: Comments upon the Mar 48 ish of Startling stories.

Item: Cover. #1. Green clothed person, evidently of the form mammary biped, doing something vaguely reminiscent of the handshake of a lodge, while either shrieking or screaming. However, the ever-present triangle is missing. Also . . . add various bits of shattered glass, machinery and other things (for atmosphere, no doubt).

Item: Story. One of Three. The implications are profound but since I only had six months of physics, it is too deep for me. Shall we be generous and vote it not, since I couldn't understand it? We shall.

Item. Story. And We Sailed The Mighty Dark. Pretty good. Love story, either satire or a good story. I haven't decided yet. Whatever it is, I liked it.

Item: Stories. (I am saving space.) Don't Look Now. It seems that Kuttner is slipping. This is not up to his regular style, this is not one of his better ones, I didn't like it so mush (the error is intended).

Mistake Inside. The man in Inside Outside, however, he is Outside Inside, which means that he is insout ideside . . . or is inside out, or outside in, or something. If my memory does not fail me Blish is a fan or something. What a mixup.

Climate disordered. Evidently inspired by the recent news of the snowstorm of New Yawk and other things. Pretty good.

That Trump thing. Very good. Nuf sed.

Weinbaum continues to be Weinbaum, unsurpassed, and very good. This months HoF is up to the standard you evidently wish to set. I liked it very much.—*1626 Coney Island Avenue, Brooklyn 30, New York.*

Okay, Miss Ups—Ooops, Miss Inside Out, so you don't like mush. Too rich a soap opera diet or just plain rugged? C'mon, tell us.

FURTHER INSIDE OUTSIDE-ISM
by Harry E. Mongold

Dear Ed: "One of Three" is good and Virginia is a very pretty girl (The illustrations in your mags keep me whistling. I love to whistle.) I had some trouble following the action. For example, Chapter XIII should have begun five paragraphs earlier than it did. I don't know what to say about the underlying theory except that it assumes a fifth dimension in which several four-dimensional continua could co-exist. As for Virginia's policies of action, I don't blame her a bit. Where whole universes have to die out anyway, what does it matter which you stick with?

The illustration with "Don't Look Now" is unfortunate, but perhaps the artist thought the plot was obvious anyway. In such cases, however, I'd think a symbolic picture or a mere design would be better. When there isn't much in the tale that the illustrator can depict interestingly, I mean, except the event that gives away the ending.

Frank Belknap Long must have written his contribution in one sitting with scarcely time out for a drink of Scotch. I can't remember all the things I thought were ridiculous about it. I can mention the corny ending.

Blish's tale is cute fantasy. What I want to know is, if facing Inside makes you part of the events there, what does the corresponding fact of turning your back on Outside do to the latter place? If there are people facing Outside, how do their backs look to us? (It can't be that I take it too literally.) The business of simulacra didn't seem logical but I was fascinated anyway.

"The Penultimate Trump" is satisfactory, altho the idea that "fear of punishment" is the best social control is rather crudely applied. The punishments of life should be both immediate and logical. It is usually the dislike by others, refusal of their cooperation in fun and work, that is most effective.

Sprague suited, and the Weinbaum reprint was well worth the space.—*616 Franklin Street, Burlington, Iowa.*

We didn't blame Virginia either—but we didn't find the other Long story ridiculous once we had accepted its mood and spirit. As for the Outside-Inside business, please keep turning around, Harry!

HE ASKS FOR IT!
by Joseph R. Rhoden Jr.

Dear Sir: Most mags (stf that is) claim to appreciate criticism, which of course is just not true, because if they do why is it that I have had several praising letters published by different mags—but when I try to kick about something—in a nice sort of way—my letters are always relegated to the waste basket! So here is my first try to you.

I believe that SS could be improved in several respects: the most important being that you should try to get more stories by the better writers of fantasy and scientifiction. I think that a truly weird tale now and then would also be an improvement.

So far as the March issue goes, I have not finished

reading it as yet, but can tell you that the lead is not very well written. I think that authors of this type of story should, now and then, be—or, at least try to be—original. The unfortunate thing about stf is that there are a few writers who try to be original, while the rest simply follow the lead of the few.

Some of your readers make interesting comments. I disagree very much with Wanda Reid, however. I am afraid that she hasn't read enough of the works of A. Merritt. I'll admit that Merritt's literary qualities are not of the highest caliber, but he *is* original in some of his works. One of his best noveis was the "Ship of Ishtar". I would compare "The Ship of Ishtar" with some of the works of Lovecraft, Wells and Chambers (Robert W.) in terms of originality of plot, not in literary quailty. Generally speaking, I agree that "Burn Witch Burn", was not one of Merritt's best, but he really wrote some pretty good stories.

Anyone interested in female fantasy writers should try the various anthologies. Women do not seem to do a very good job on stf in general. However, there have been a number of really good horror, psychological and terror taies written by the ladies. I refer you particularly to "The Yellow Wall Paper" and to some of the works of Edith Wharton; after all, "Wuthering Heights" was a ghost story as well as a romance.

In case you are interested, I agree with Frances Hubacek that there is too much "mushy love" in some of your stories. I have a couple of short stories which I shall send to you some day—I know that my literary qualities are not very high, but I do *try* to be original—I give the "mushy love" angle a new twist: something on the order of Connarde (he wrote plays), and DeLaGue (he also wrote plays—*very* gruesome ones, too).

Also, in case you are interested: Frances Hubacek is 20 years old, and is married! Nope, I don't know her and can't tell you what she looks like, and I doubt that she has ever heard of me! Maybe I'm telepathic or psychic, or something.

So, I'll sign off with this thought:

Beyond the mighty River Cozxygon
  Lies the land—the great beyond:
Rises the towering peaks of Hagnor
  And the hills of Ammerphrand.

Comes from that land, beyond the mind;
  In chariots of golden fire
The etheric masters of Balchazzarhad
  Drawn by steeds of Valhallan sire.

The kings of Vorse and the rulers of Gnakse:
  The Devil's princes all;
Flee to the world known only to men,
  Where the sword of Agollum sings not.

Here, where the cries of the dying
  Are heard, only by the warriors of 'Effon:
Where? Yea, where? are the mighty of Zorg?
  And the red, blood dripping, sword of Cohemus?

P.S. I wonder if any of your readers might be interested in British fantasy publications. I may be able to get some from a friend in England. If anyone is interested, all they have to do is send me a stamped self-addressed envelope, and I'll let them know when (and if) I get them. And don't worry if you don't get an answer for several months. NOTE: I'm not in the business of selling fantasy publications. I'm an importer of British railway models and an exporter of American made railroad models, my only interest in trying to get these fantasy mags is that I like to help the fans get hard to get publications.—*1244 North Dearborn Street, Chicago 10, Illinois*

It looks to us as if your model railroad ran out of rhymes, meter, scansion and just about everything else, including the less finite elements of free or blank verse. We're a miniature soldier man ourselves and tend to regard railroads as obsolete. Perhaps the proximity of the Long Island Railroad has something to do with it, even though we don't ride it.

[*Turn page*]

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You may have something in your remarks on women writers and stf but we're darned if we know why. But, come to think of it, Leigh Brackett, Izak Dinesin (Baroness Karen Blixen, who wrote "Seven Gothic Tales"), Catherine Moore, E. Mayne Hull, May Sinclair and others do seem to tend more toward fantasy than stf. But who cares as long as it's good. Not we.

So, in signing off, we leave you with a Huba, Hubacek!

WHO'S A BAD EGG?
by Fanny Rugby

Dear Ed: You've just never learned the first and foremost lesson for Eds.

Which is that one bad egg spoils the omelet.

Oh, Ed, the March Startling was a good omelet, but oh, oh, Ed, what relative of the publisher made you print Climate—Disordered? It's not sciencetificition. It's not Startling. I think it does not even know its own father. The effort you put into picturing a genuine B—25, you could have used in kicking the author around the block.

Please, don't do that to us readers any more.—*4902 Remsen Avenue, Jersey City, New Jersey.*

What's "sciencetificition?" We dunno.

FLAK
by Pfc Don McGreevey

Dear Ed: This being the first letter I am ever written to The Ether Vibrates I am undertaking to clear up a few salient points which your readers have brought up. But first, the poem:

Rime of the Ancient Magazine

It is an ancient magazine
And its novel is "One of Three"
Now by thy long grey beard and
Glittering eye (Ye Ed) the story boreth me.

The plot is an old and hoary one
It has most often come to light
But because the action was plausible
I'll give you a C-plus, all right?

Next upon this infamous list
Is the sailor of the mighty dark;
The story gets a B for being interesting
And for the babe that was cold and stark. (Dead).

"Don't Look Now" there's a "Mistake Inside"
A "Climate Disordered" and a rocket ride
On a beautiful ship in the "Penultimate Trump"
To the barren wastes of the Celestial Dump.

The aforementioned space hacks are corny
Their plots are disordered and old;
But, still in all, they are readworthy
So I'll give them a C apiece, all told.

"The brink of Infinity" of the Hall of Fame
Should never have raised from the dead
The people that sent in that popular demand
Are afflicted with rocks in the head.

Having made with the poetry I shall now torture my readers with a description of the process by which they too can be popular or "How to build a super Atom-bomb." Friends, are you too afflicted with falling hair, falling arches and falling plaster? Do you come home plastered because the ceiling fell on you? By following the simple formula set forth in the accompanying paragraphs you may rid yourself of these annoying troubles. You will also rid the city of yourself.

In times to come you will be known as the man who took it with him when he went (the neighborhood, that is). The following paragraphs are the answer to Russell Clagett's question on how to build a super A-bomb without setting it off prematurely by exceeding critical mass. Russell, if you live within ten miles of New York I shall move.

In 1932 Watson and Cockcroft bombarded a target of Lithium with protons and found that alpha particles were emitted. In simpler words this means that if you smash an atom of Lithium with an atom of Hydrogen you get a release of energy and two atoms of helium as an end product. This can be very easily proven. Hydrogen has a mass of one and an atomic number of one. Lithium has a mass of seven and an atomic number of three. The end product is two atoms of helium, each one having a mass of four and an atomic of two. The masses of the materials used were detected by mass spectra. Lithium (7) plus Hydrogen (1) totaled 8.0241 while the two Helium atoms, Hellum (4) plus Hellum (4), totaled 8.0056. The difference between these two numbers shows that during the course of the reaction 0.0185 units of mass has been converted into energy.

Using the formula for the conversion of mass units into ergs we find that 0.0185 mass units equal 27.2 x 10 (minus to the sixth power) ergs of energy. Following the formula we find that one gram will release 388.5 ergs of energy but, and this is the catch, only at a temperature of two million degrees centigrade and at a pressure of nineteen thousand atmospheres. Temperatures and pressures such as are needed for this reaction to take place exist only in the sun and, as the

In the June THRILLING WONDER STORIES

On the eve of making the first spatial trip aboard the Star Lady, Barry Williams finds himself inhabiting another man's body on a strange, unknown planet in

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Thats all for now, kiddies; go home and build your A-bombs.—CAC, RA 12 262 611, Hq., 65th *Antiaircraft Artillery Group, Fort Amador, Canal Zone.*

So take an ancient baking dish
And line its bottom with butter (margarine will do as well)
And stir in well whipped heavy cream,
Some spun sugar, and stiffly-beaten whites of seven eggs.

And to this luscious mixture add
Two pounds of sliced mushrooms, a can of Mayonnaise, the juice of three lemons and
The meat from six large lobsters.

A mess of crayfish cometh next
And shrimps picked off the floor
A fifth of Oleroso and
Some arrack from Lahore.

Two cups of rum selected from
Jamaica and Barbadoes
Top with a crumbled toasted bun
And sprinkle with Calvados.

Then stick your head in the oven and inhale once—that's all, brother! Who needs an atom bomb?

CONSTRAINED
by James E. Hamilton Jr.

Dear Editor: The March issue of *Startling Stories* arrived this a.m., and after perusing it, I feel constrained to write about same.

ONE OF THREE, by Wesley Long. A great story, worthy of a place in your swiftly expanding gallery of classics. Is Wesley Long by any chance a nom de plume of Will F. Jenkins, also known as Murray Leinster? More, my dear sir.

AND WE SAILED THE MIGHTY DARK, by Frank Belknap Long. If the answer to my first question is in the negative, are Wesley Long and Frank Belknap Long related? Another better than average story.

DON'T LOOK NOW, by Henry Kuttner. The writing that made such stories as SWORD OF TOMORROW and DARK WORLD great seems to need more space to develop itself than a short story provides, but Kuttner seems to have learned how to adapt his style to meet changing limitations of space. A good story. I am looking forward to his novel in the next issue. It sounds like a terrific yarn.

MISTAKE INSIDE, by James Blish. The name is totally unfamiliar, but if this is a sample, I hope that condition will swiftly be revised. Good story.

CLIMATE—DISORDERED, by Carter Sprague. Another unfamiliar name, but though the story was the poorest in the issue, it was not bad. That fine bit of

[*Turn page*]

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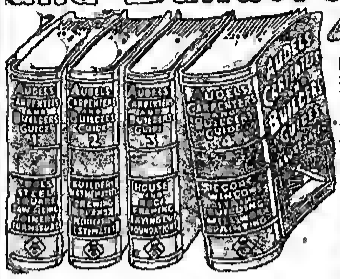

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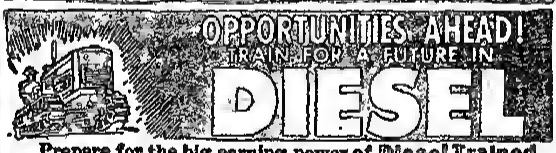

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ironic justice in the ending saved a rather listless narrative.

THE PENULTIMATE TRUMP, by R. C. W. Ettinger. Well, what do you know? Four new authors in one issue; at least the names are new. This story was fair, but showed flashes of more ability than was utilized in the writing of this one. Would you object if I sent you a story one of these fine days, or any other kind, for that matter.

THE BRINK OF INFINITY, by Stanley G. Weinbaum. It has been said, by some seer who has been dead more years than I've been living, which latter quantity is not quite twenty, that "Only the good die young." Had the fellow that penned that line had Weinbaum in mind, he couldn't have covered the case more accurately. Weinbaum died too soon.

On the whole, one of your best issues. And with a Kuttner novel scheduled for the next one, it should be very nearly up to the same high standard. DARK WORLD, VALLEY OF THE FLAME and LANDS OF THE EARTHQUAKE made superb issues of rather poor ones, and MASK OF CIRCE sounds as if it could do the same, only I hope it won't have to.

As for TEV, Tombrock has what might be a good idea. But I don't think it is too practicable, what with the present disordered order of world affairs. The only other letter I'll bother to comment on is Wanda Reid's. I'll say this: I have yet to see a Merritt story that's as good as any one of six or eight Kuttner-Hammond stories I could mention. In fact, I think I will. Here goes.

WHAT HATH ME?, VALLEY OF THE FLAME, SWORD OF TOMORROW, DARK WORLD, I AM EDEN, WAY OF THE GODS, LANDS OF THE EARTHQUAKE, ATOMIC!, THE POWER AND THE GLORY, CALL HIM DEMON, DARK DAWN and ABSALOM. I said six or eight. That makes twelve, which more than fulfills my statement, so I think I'll close this and get it in the mails.—*Hartwick, New York.*

Wes Long is *not* Will Jenkins under any pseudonym, James. Nor is he any relation to Frank Belknap Ditto. But the latter is a real stf veteran author as surely you should know. His stuff goes way, way back.

That's quite a list of Kuttnerepics you wind up your epistle with. But then, Hank is quite a lad with the typewriter.

Next Issue's Headliners

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A Story of the Spaceways

By JACK VANCE

AND MANY OTHERS!

POT POURRI
by Ed Farnham

Dear Ed: Have just wound up the March 1sh of Startling Stories. Didn't get the plot or the point of the feature story—ONE OF THREE. Too much technical detail and too little story value to hold my interest. To me, ONE OF THREE was as dry as sandpaper and about as scratchy.

The rest of the mag was just sorta so-so (to me) but then that very likely isn't the fault of the authors, as I have been ill for the past 13 weeks and haven't had much interest in anything.

TEV was chuck full of interesting material. I see that a recent letter of mine under the alias of Jordan Green (which I here and now drop forever) has received Honorable Mention. Thanks, fellers! Ed, you are correct both ways. I have been for sometime trying to get up a good, rousing scrap, but apparently the readers of TEV have lost their pep, as my sparks failed to strike fire. To tell the truth, I do like Fantasy, but prefer it not to be too spooky.

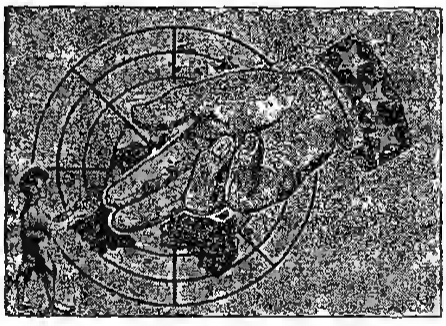
Wish you would ask Roger Rehm who ghost-wrote that letter for him. He sure didn't do it all by hisself. So he don't like Bergey?? He oughta stick his head in two slop buckets! Bergey is the Best In The Field, *BAR NONE!* Bergey did it *AGAIN!!!* The cover for the March '48 ish is a masterpiece. Good color, no BEM, no over-dressed HEERO, and just little enough clothes on the Gal to make the cover pic an eye-catcher. AND IT FITS A POINT IN THE STORY!!!!!!

Bergey is the only cover artist that I have yet seen on either SS or TWS who makes his cover pics fit the story. These here now FENS who keep panning Bergey don't know a REAL artist's work when they see it!

The inside illos were excellent. Clear and distinct. I'll bet a lot of the blame for poor inside pics is the fault of the printer and not the artist.

Saw the letter from Cap. Slater. Thought that guy

[*Turn page*]



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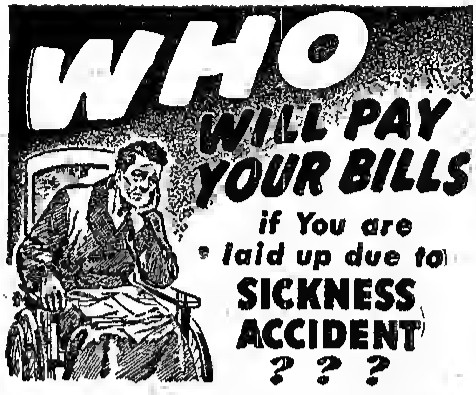

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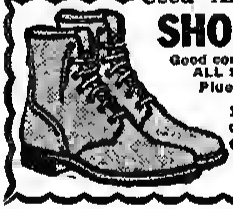

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was dead or mebbe married. (Same thing. You're out of circulation either way.) Haven't heard from him in a long, long time. Wotsamatter, Cap? Sick?

Capt. Slater is one of the finest fellows I know, and if the readers of TEV want a real pen-pal, write to Slater.

Hey—all you fellers and Gals who like Bergey, hows about forming a Bergey Fan Club—via the mail?

As for liking the shorts—OK, bring on your pet Bradbury. I'll try *anything*—once. I like the shorts in any mag.

Hey, Ed: Couldn't ya compromise and let us call you Ye Sarge-without going in for the rest of the Tabued Tribe? Ya know, you have the Final Say-so re our letters in TEV—and we *all* know the Sarge is the Big Bug in the Army—so, hows about it, Ed??—*1139 East 44th Street, Chicago 15, Illinois.*

Okay, Ed, form a Bergey club—with little lapel BEM's for insignia. But don't call us Sarge. We really swore off that business. And don't call us a bug, especially a big one.

Well, that's it once more and it's sign-off time. It seemed like pretty good fun to us and hope you feel the same at this stage of your reading. Keep those letters pouring in, everybody, and thanks to you all. Write The Editor, STARTLING STORIES, Suite 1400, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, New York.

So long once more.

—THE EDITOR

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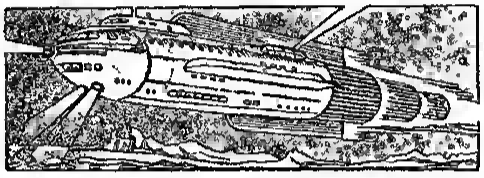
REVIEW OF THE SCIENCE FICTION FAN PUBLICATIONS

WELL, for the third straight time the number of fanzines with A-listing have a comfortable margin on their more plebeian B-brothers. So perhaps it is becoming a habit—for which, cheers.

A number of new magazines have come in and we'll discuss them at once, without giving them a letter listing. Most important, it



seems to us, is the already announced LOKI, a quarterly, put out by Gerry de la Ree of 9 Bogert Place, Westwood, New Jersey, and co-edited by de la Ree and Mrs. Genevieve K. Stephens of 530 Moyer Avenue, Alma, Michigan. The price per issue is ten cents, payable to Mr. de la Ree.

For their premier appearance the editors have lined up an impressive array of amateur and professional writing talent. The latter includes such names as Eando Binder, Richard S. Shaver, David H. Keller, Stanley G. Weinbaum and Dorothy Quick. Leading amateurs listed are Genevieve K. Stephens, Albert Toth, Marijane Nuttall, Joe Kennedy and Stephanie Grace among others. Truly a distinguished company.

The magazine, save for editorial, letters and an announcement of a five-dollar prize to be awarded the best bit of poetry or prose in the issue by a Mr. Woodman from Maine, is devoted entirely to subjective writing—i.e. poetry and fiction. Among the poems we especially liked Dr. Keller's "Helen of Troy". and "The Waiters" by Stephanie Grace. Binder and Kennedy walked off with top story honors.

If this debutant pace can be maintained LOKI is going to be the best fanzine around in years. Congratulations, Gerry and Mrs. Stephens.

A new pocket-sized fanzine to put in its appearance is IF!, listed for future publication either bi-monthly or irregularly, cost-

[*Turn page*]

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This magazine is cast on a much more modest scale than LOKI, but has a considerable mead of merit—listing fact and fiction by the editor, Lin Carter, Norm Storer, Don Wilson—and for some reason winding up as strongest in its hind-quarters with a very amusing undefineable entitled WHICH I DRANK by Carl Erickson and an essay on humor in stf by Joe Kennedy which is both deft and erudite.

Wackiest new entry in the fanzine field is WILD-HAIR, subtitled for no apparent reason "The Hirsute Fanzine." This is apparently an offshoot of the feud which recently split the Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society, as it is edited by Charles Burbee, former boss of SHANGRI L'AFFAIRES, official LASFS organ, at Alhambra, California, and sells for 10c per copy, two for 15c.

In it the whole tribe of Los Angeles familiars, running from E. Everett Evans through Cy Condra to F. Towner Laney and including much sounding off by Burbee himself, analyze themselves, one another and fandom as they have known it and hope to know it. Good enough fun in an introspective sort of way.

And now for the A-list.

CANADIAN FANDOM, 118 St. George Street, Toronto 5, Ontario. Editor, Beak Taylor. Published bi-monthly. 10c per copy.

This, the handbook of Canadian fanactivities, is up to usual with good articles and features by the editor, Fred Hurter Jr., Barbara Bovard, Les Croutch, Bill Grant and others. A good fat dime's worth, this time augmented by a small brochure entitled TORQUE, which lists organizations and plans for the TORCON, coming World Science Fiction Convention to be held July 3, 4, and 5 at the Rai Purdy Studios, 55 Queen Street East, this coming summer. Looks like an excellent promotion stunt.

DREAM QUEST, 495 North Third Street, Banning, California. Editor, Don Wilson. Published irregularly. 10c per copy, 3 for 25c etc.

A top-flight fanzine which makes a serious study of science fiction, past and present, with many a thoughtful glance at what the future may hold. Rex Ward and Sam Moskowitz take a look at the past in a pair of carefully documented articles and Gilbert Swenson cons the present with his exhaustive PRO-PHILE. The future is taken care of by Rog Phillips, who seems to feel (and quite wisely too) that the advance of stf depends in large degree upon the development of new fields of science. Henry Elsner's review of More's MILLENIUM and a brief poem by Genevieve K. Stephens (ubiquitous wench!) fill out an excellent issue.

FANEWS, 1443 Fourth Avenue South, Fargo, North Dakota. Editor, Walter Dunkelberger. Published irregularly. 10c per issue, 12 for $1.00.

Dunk seems to be indulging in considerable experimentation with his format and no two issues have been alike lately—but the sprightliest of all the news

and gossip sheets of fandom is welcome in any form. Okay, Dunk.

FANTASY ADVERTISER, 643 South Bixel Street, Los Angeles 14, California. Editor, Gus Willmorth. Published bi-monthly. 10c per issue, 50c per year.

The most complete and best-printed magazine for stf collectors takes another step toward professionalism with the announcement in its January, 1948, issue that small fees will be paid for all articles accepted for publication. Well packed with dealers' lists and advertisements, it features an essay by Thomas Henry Carter on the literary value of the Shaver series which has won a certain notoriety with its appearances in one of our competitors. A must for collectors.

FANTASY COMMENTATOR, 19 East 235th Street, New York 66, New York. Editor, A. Langley Searles. Published quarterly. 25c per copy, 5 copies $1.00.

The most scholarly of fanzines continues to draw chiefly upon its impressive list of contributing editors, William H. Evans, Thyril L. Ladd, Sam Moskowitz, Matthew H. Onderdonk, Darrell C. Richardson and Richard Witter. This time Mr. Ladd has the lead spot with a well-executed profile by Ray Cummings and daughter and Moskowitz, in the tenth installment of his monumental history of fandom, gets up to the first World Science Fiction Convention in 1938. Good reading for serious-minded fans.

FANTASY-TIMES, 101-02 Northern Boulevard, Corona, New York. Editor, James V. Taurasi. Published monthly. 10c per issue, 3 for 25c, $1.00 per year.

Ray Van Houton, David Kishi and Lane Stannard provide chief editorial support for Editor Taurasi in the first three issues of 1948. This eastern rival of FANEWS continues to pick up plenty of speed in its effort to overhaul its Midwestern rival. Good prozine reviews are a help.

MACABRE, 7 Tacoma Avenue, Toronto 5, Ontario, Canada. Editors, Don Hutchinson & Jack Doherty. Published bi-monthly. 10c per copy, 3 copies 25c.

Another newcomer and a worthy one which arrived just too late for introductory listing. These Canadians, what with grabbing the convention for 1948 and putting out excellent fanzines are stepping right up of late. Joe Kennedy has a highly amusing description of the financial difficulties of fancollection and is backed with stories, poetry and features by a long list including Forrest J. Ackerman, Conrad Pederson, Greg Ctanston, Les. Croutch, Bill Grant, John Holbrook Caley and the editors. We liked.

SHANGRI LA, Apartment #20, 1116 Georgia Street, Los Angeles 15, California. Editor, Dale Hart. Published bi-monthly. 10c per copy, 6 copies 50c.

The transformed SHANGRI L'AFFAIRES is still a sprightly catch-all of LASFS meeting minutes (by Arthur Jean Cox), fiction, fact and poetry despite the amputation of feuding material which led to the demolition of its predecessor. Especially interesting we found Forrest Ackerman's recounting of a collaboration with C. N. Moore, now Mrs. Henry Kuttner. We hope they go monthly again soon.

'SPARX, Leverett House E-21, Cambridge 38, Massachusetts. Editor, Henry 'M. Spelman III. Published quarterly. 10c per copy.

Mostly serious stuff in somewhat undergraduate manner, enlightened by some good book reviews and a worthwhile piece on collector's swaps by Vincent Williams. This 'zine will need a typographical face lifting in the near future to save itself from B-listing.

THE GORGON, 4936 Grove Street, Denver 11, Colorado. Editor, Stanley Mullen. Published bi-monthly. 15c per copy, 7 issues 75c.

We still think GORGON the best existent fanzine.

[Turn page]

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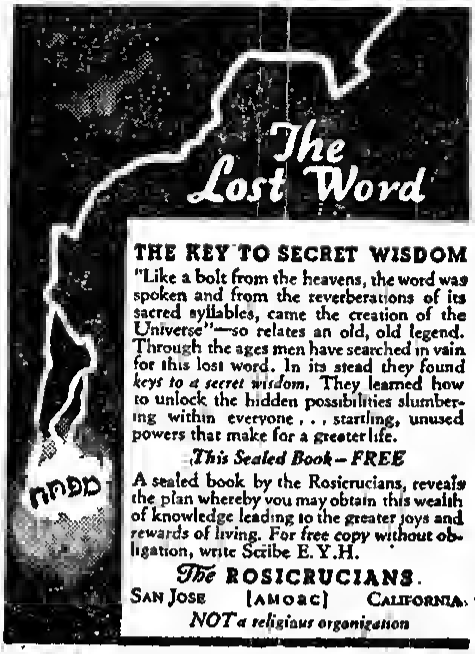

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especially in format, printing, artwork and the other technical aspects of magazine publishing. Furthermore, its technical excellence is backed this issue by an interesting editorial compilation. Especially notable to us were short stories by Shan Nosgorov and Dr. Keller, a fascinating article on HAUNTED MINES by Lee Beecher and an essay on certain aspects of A. Merritt's work by Phil Rasch. Among the poetic offerings is one by (you guessed it) Genevieve K. Stephens. Monopoly maybe?

THE NATIONAL FANTASY FAN, 813 Eastern Avenue, Connersville, Indiana. Editor, Ray C. Higgs. No price listed.

Mostly occupied with letters from and doings of members of the National Fantasy Fan Federation, of which it is an official organ. Good of its kind but something should be done about the interior artwork . . . mostly malodorous.

Well, that's the A-list and, if not the longest on record, of pretty uniformly high quality. As for the B's—well, let's take a look.

BURROUGHS BULLETIN, Box #78, Manito, Illinois. Editors, Verneli & Dorothea Coriell. Published monthly. Free to Edgar Rice Burroughs fans. Just about what you'd expect, with a heavyweight effort to drag in stf by its already sore ears.

DREAMLAND OPINIONATOR, 495 North Third Street, Banning, California. Editors, Don Wilson & Howard Miller. Published annually. No price listed. A fan poll in which the voters are asked to name favorite pro and fanzine stories, stf and fantasy books, favorite artists, fans, humorists, magazines and the like. Along traditional lines.

OTHER WORLDS, 3401 Sixth Avenue, Columbus, Georgia. Editor, Paul Cox. Published irregularly. No price listed. General southern fandoings with some general news and a book and magazine listing by Editor Cox. Slim.

PORTLAND SCIENCE-FANTASY SOCIETY NEWS BULLETIN, 3435 Northeast 38th Avenue, Portland 13, Oregon. Published 8 times per year. Free. A good modest local bulletin.

TYMPANI, 2215 Benjamin Street Northeast, Minneapolis 18, Minnesota. Editors, Robert L. Stein & Redd Boggs. Published bi-monthly. 5c per copy, 6 copies 25c. This jumper from B to A-listing to B again is a bit short of its usual standards this time, consisting mostly of gossip and news items and letters, leavened only by Stanley Mullen's review of OF WORLDS BEYOND, current stf symposium.

SPACEWARP, 2120 Bay Street, Saginaw, Michigan. Editor, Arthur H. Rapp. Published monthly. 10c per copy, 3 copies 25c. Ben Singer, Vaughn Greene, Wilkie Connor, Editor Rapp, Arthur Rapp, Redd Boggs, Bill Groover, Genevieve K. Stephens (i) and others are putting out a lively periodical that lacks only meatier lead features or stories and a neater format to jump high into the A-listing.

THE ROCKET NEWS LETTER, 91 Pine Avenue, Riverside, Illinois. Editors, Wayne Proell & George Whittington. Published monthly. 10c per copy, $1.00 per year. The Journal of the Chicago Rocket Society is a competent if unpretentious one which makes interesting reading for those who want to go a long way in a hurry in the near future.

THE SYDNEY FUTURIAN, 160 Beach Street, Coogee, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia. Editor, Vol Molesworth. Published monthly. 3c per copy (to Americans, six copies for one current prozine). We hate to list this newsy little 'zine as a B, especially since pickings have been lean for Down Under fans of recent years, but it has not yet acquired A stature. However, it is a potentially first-class job, and we have a hunch it will soon be up with the winners. And always interesting.

VAMPIRE INDEX 68 MADBURY Road, Durham, New Hampshire. Editor, Boff Perry. Published irregularly. 10c for non-FAPA members. Complete compilation of

the bizarre and sundry offerings which appeared in Joe Kennedy's lamented fanzine, VAMPIRE. Probably a one-shot unless Kennedy goes back into business.

That does it and probably a good thing too. Not a bad report at all, taking one thing with another. For review, send your fanzine to The Editor, Suite No. 1400, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, New York. We'll take over from there.

—THE EDITOR.

HARD LUCK DIGGINGS

(Concluded from page 108)

Rogge knitted his brow. "What law am I flouting?"

"The statute created over thirty years ago for the protection and encouragement of friendly autochthones."

Rogge said nothing.

"You will either cooperate completely, or I will request your removal."

Rogge looked away. "Perhaps you are right," he muttered.

A faint sound came to their ears. Turning, they looked to the gap in the floor. It was fast disappearing. Even as they watched, the splinters, strangely pliant, turned themselves down, knitted to a smooth gleaming surface. Where the gap had been now shone a small gleaming object.

Magnus Ridolph strode forward, lifted it, displayed it wordlessly to Rogge. It was a complex crystal—blood-colored fire—perfectly formed except on one side, where it had been torn away from its matrix.

"A ruby, I believe," said Magnus Ridolph. He looked at the staring superintendent coolly returned to his inspection of the jewel

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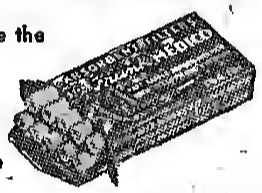

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